











**THE GIFT OF THE GODS**

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# THE GIFT OF THE GODS

BY  
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"ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS"  
ETC.






# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A SEA MIST - - - - -	I
II. HIS ACT AND DEED - - - - -	18
III. THE MAN FROM THE SEA - - - - -	37
IV. THE STRAND - - - - -	50
V. A HIATUS - - - - -	59
VI. A WALLED GARDEN - - - - -	72
VII. ROUND THE PEAT-STACK - - - - -	89
VIII. TORQUIL'S DUNE - - - - -	98
IX. A SIGN - - - - -	108
X. AMATEUR DETECTIVES - - - - -	120
XI. AN ENDLESS BAND - - - - -	131
XII. THE LAIRD'S COAT - - - - -	141
XIII. THE BREATH OF SCANDAL - - - - -	151
XIV. THE MARKET STANCE - - - - -	160
XV. THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS - - - - -	173
XVI. A MESSAGE - - - - -	190
XVII. THE BLACK PAMPHLET - - - - -	201
XVIII. MISUNDERSTOOD - - - - -	214
XIX. THE EVICTION - - - - -	225
XX. CLINICAL SURGERY - - - - -	239
XXI. A WEATHERCOCK - - - - -	252
XXII. A FOOL'S WISDOM - - - - -	265
XXIII. THE LIGHT OF LOVE - - - - -	279





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# THE GIFT OF THE GODS

## CHAPTER I

### A SEA MIST

IT was a low room, overlooking an unbroken expanse of the Atlantic, and it contained all the elements of this world's tragedy—briefly, a man, a woman, and a child. But it held also the words which have taken the sting out of so many of those tragedies :

*“ And there shall be a new heaven and a new earth . . . ”*

They came from the woman who, seated at the window, was reading aloud to the child upon her lap. The westering sun, low down upon the horizon of the sea, caught the plaits of her copper-coloured hair—which, finding scant room to coil themselves upon her head, overlapped its contour—and, turning their edges to gold, gave her, as it were, a saintly nimbus. The man, seated loosely, discontentedly, at the big oak table which

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

usurped more than its fair share of the quaint, old-fashioned room, evidently noticed the effect, for he muttered a remark about cloudland under his breath.

“—*And there shall be no more sea,*” read on the clear feminine voice—a pleasant voice, with faint Highland inflections in it.

“Zen I s’ant go a-heav’n,” broke in the child’s treble decisively. “Daddy s’all go, a-cause he don’t ’ike a-sea : but mum and me ’ll go to a-other place ; plenty of water there.”

The man behind gave a curious little chuckle, as if he enjoyed the mistake, and even the woman smiled as she laid aside the book from which she had been reading and cuddled the child closer to her breast. Its curls matched her own in colour ; its eyes, like hers, matched the blue-green of the sea ; but the frail little figure, almost lost in its white flannel nightgown, could claim no parentage from the tall graceful one which held it. Nor, by natural right, could it claim fatherhood from the well-developed frame of the man who sat at the table. Its kinship lay in the nameless look of fatigue in the latter’s handsome, somewhat sodden face—the look which reckless living brings with it, and which here emphasized every one of the owner’s forty and odd years.

## A SEA MIST

"You are not understanding, childie," came the woman's voice, again with a suspicion of tender amusement in it. "The sea is cruel and wicked sometimes, and you know there will be nothing unkind in heaven. The sea drowns men and women and poor little children. It takes them away from people who love them, as mother loves Ronald—takes them right away——"

"Right away to heav'n," assented the boy, with a childish delight in the catastrophe. His eyes, fixed on the golden glory of that sea and sky, lost, merged in each other, had the confused look of coming sleep and dreams in them, and his head, in the pause which followed, nestled closer to its resting-place.

The look of dreams came to the woman's eyes also.

"Sometimes it is a dreadful storm, like those we are having in winter, Ronald, when the wind sings in the chimney and foolish children get frightened; and sometimes the poor sailors only lose their way on the great wide sea and steer on the rocks—steer straight on the rocks, though they are looking, and looking, and looking——"

"'Twinkle, twinkle, 'ickle 'tar,'" interrupted the child, suddenly sitting up wide awake. "Oh,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

mummie ! I want a-see the lighthouse a-gin, 'fore I goes a-teep."

The sun was close to the horizon now, sending a dimpled path like beaten gold over the sea. There was no visible sign of land westwards, but land was there for all that. Right away, lost in the gold and the glare, lay a low group of sandy islands, and on the outermost one stood the last beacon between Scotland and America.

"You must look quick, then," said his mother, noting the position of the sun ; "it ought to begin in a minute or two."

Both pairs of blue eyes had the real sailor's look in them—the strained, anxious, yet certain look—as they watched and waited.

Then suddenly the light shrank ; the sun was no longer a circle : it had dipped——

Below what ? Not the horizon, surely ?

Even the child's four-year-old eyes had looked upon that panorama of sea and sky too often not to know that something was amiss, and turn to the older ones for explanation. "It is a sea-mist, dear, creeping up to the land ; before the wind, maybe. So you will not see the light begin to-day. Come, it is time for bed."

"Pore 'ickle sailor-boys : got no twinkle-'tar to-night," murmured Ronald, resigning himself



## A SEA MIST

to her tightening arms. "Dood-night, daddy dear. Mum and me'll 'top at Westray, but oo'll go a' London wizout a'sea."

It was a natural enough confusion on the child's part, since Ronald Macdonald, senior, never hesitated in declaring that his Paradise was bounded on the north by Hyde and on the south by the Green Parks ; but for some reason the words brought a frown to the hearer's face, and he kissed the child perfunctorily.

"Don't stop talking rubbish with him half the night, Meg," he said surlily. "It's bad for him, and I want to speak to you—about business."

Margaret Macdonald gave her husband a quick look, and her step, as she carried the child upstairs, seemed to have an added burden in it, for business, she knew of old, meant the paying of bills, and there was little wherewithal to pay them in that square old house, set on the very edge of the sea, though it had been the home of the Macdonalds of Westray for generations on generations. How could there be, when the rents for the wind-swept crofts stretching north and west were never paid ? And how could they be paid, when the gift of full harvest was denied to the sandy soil, and the only increase of thirty-fold—an hundred as the years went by—was the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

increase of humanity, bringing an increase of the poor-rate to be paid out of an empty purse ?

It was an old problem to Margaret Macdonald, and it always brought a perplexed frown to her face. Yet she had given seven years of life to its solution, and had brought to the task a keenness of vitality which was even more remarkable in her face and figure than their beauty and grace ; though these showed sharply in the dingy old room as she returned to stand beside her husband.

“ Well, Ronald, what is it ? ” she asked, as he sate silent. There was a certain patient decision in the question, and her hand, as she spoke, went out to a decanter, which stood upon the table, and pushed it away : the action spoke volumes.

“ I’ve only had a glass,” said her husband irritably. “ A fellow may surely have so much to cheer him in this beastly hole. I can’t stand it much longer, Meg ; and Begbie, M.P., has renewed his offer to buy—more fool he. That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

“ Yes,” she assented, moving slowly to the window again. His eyes followed her with an odd mixture of anger and anxiety.

“ Hang it all, Meg ! ” he broke out suddenly ; “ I wish you would come down to facts sometimes

## A SEA MIST

and discuss the question rationally. You won't even try to consider it. Now, why on earth shouldn't I sell the island, crofters and all, and go away to live——"

She interrupted him with the calm of one who knows a subject thoroughly.

"You couldn't live on the interest of ten thousand."

He gave a vexed laugh. "That's so like you, Meg. Who was thinking of the interest? I wasn't. The principle would last my time."

"And the boy?" There was no scorn in her voice, only the old patience.

Her husband shifted in his seat uneasily. "He will have to earn his bread, anyhow, poor little chap! if he ever lives to need it. But that is doubtful—the doctor said so, you know, Meg, and it is best to look the fact in the face. Besides, if he were ever so strong, he couldn't live on Westray. You know that. It's a dead loss keeping it. You won't admit it, but I believe that with all your blessed accounts and outcries over every brass farthing, you have to nibble every year at the white of that precious nest-egg of yours you are always cackling over, in order to make both ends meet. Now, don't you?"

"We manage, at any rate," she replied

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

evasively. "But the rents have been worse, of course, since the people have been learnt to expect reductions and Mr. Begbie's plan of buying the island as a model has been known. Still, it is always the house and farm free to us, and the peats, and the fish, and so many things. We could not live so cheaply elsewhere ; and, after all, you get to London in the season, Ronald."

The memory of those short weeks of freedom, hampered by the necessity of returning, like any prodigal, to the fattened calf which Highland housewives keep against guest-time, was more irritating than soothing. But as he knew perfectly well that his annual visit to his old haunts cost double what Margaret spent in keeping Westray House going all the year round, he chose another ground of complaint.

"I wish, Meg, you wouldn't call me out of my name," he said fretfully ; "I was christened Reginald. It was good enough for my poor mother, and it's good enough for me. I hate its Gaelic equivalent, as you call it. It's part and parcel of your rotten attempt to keep up a fiction. Why shouldn't I sell, and get rid of it all ?"

"Because you can't." She turned to him with a smile as she would have turned to soothe a child. "Ronald or Reginald is all one. They

## A SEA MIST

mean 'the son of a king.' And that is what you are : Ronald Macdonald, son of the old kings of Westray. You were born so, as your fathers were, and you will die so, as your fathers died. It's in your blood—you can't escape it."

Seven years before, this formula uttered by those lips, had made him—then, after a wild squander in London, short of cash, health, spirits, everything—believe it possible to play his hereditary part of proprietor when backed by his beautiful young cousin's enthusiasm. But seven years is a long time to a weak man, even when he is in the grip of a strong woman, as this one was.

"Besides," she continued, "you promised Alick, when he agreed to let you break the entail so that you might sell the big island to Mr. Begbie, that Westray itself should never——"

"And I call it a beastly shame," he interrupted angrily, "that I had to ask anyone's consent. If I had been born on the 2nd of August, 1848, instead of the 1st, I could have played old Harry with the whole estate off my own bat. That Act of Parliament was drawn up to spite me. And I never could see why your brother should have made stipulations ; more didn't——"

"He only took a percentage on the sale," she retorted coldly. "Alick——"



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“Oh, Alick was perfect, of course. I don’t deny it. And he left you everything he could scrape together in order to save the place. I know all that, and you’ll do me the credit to say that so long as he lived and might have inherited I kept my promise—though it wasn’t legally binding, you know—but now he is dead——”

“You needn’t tell me that, surely,” she interrupted, a sudden mist softening her clear eyes. “Don’t I miss him every day? Don’t I——?” She turned to the sea again, as if for silence, and again her husband’s eyes followed her. There was no nimbus now about her head, for the sky had grown grey, and the mist was creeping steadily towards the headland of cliffs which jutted out seawards between the southernmost spit of low land on which Westray House stood and that northerly stretch of poverty-stricken soil where the crofters’ huts showed like ill-built haystacks against the irregular patches of potatoes and corn.

Even without the sign of saintship to accentuate the difference between them, the man—who was still lounging slackly over the table—found it hard as ever to tell this woman the truth, which was briefly that he had already accepted Mr.

## A SEA MIST

Begbie's offer, and that the deed of sale lay ready for signature in his pocket. And, what is more, he meant so completely to sign it that there was no indecision, only a vague resentment in his sudden impatient setting aside of the subject by rising to leave the room.

"Well, think it over, Meg. You'll have to soon ; for, by Jove ! I can't stand this life much longer. I'm sick of the cant of the thing. And then, if I try to live like the rest of them here, you're down on me, as if the laird ought to be the Archangel Gabriel, with your highfalutin' ideas and your jealousy."

"Don't," she said hurriedly, in a low voice—"don't rake up *that*. I can't stand it."

He looked at her half defiantly.

"Rake up what ? If you mean that old story and that ridiculous fuss about Ishbel, I thought we had agreed to forget it."

She was silent for a second, and only her hands, clenching themselves tightly, showed that she held herself hard.

"There are some things," she said at last, "which a woman may forgive, but can't forget."

He gave a cynical laugh.

"Can't she ? Well, a man's different. I'd forgotten—quite—till you began about it."

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

As he strolled out idly across the roundel of white sea gravel set before the square old house, and so down the rough road treading northwards over the moorland, past the jutting promontory of cliffs to the cluster of cottages dignified by the name of the "clachan" on the shores of the bay beyond, Margaret Macdonald watched her husband's slouching figure with a curious calm.

Had he forgotten—forgotten those things the memory of which still, even in the dead of night, made her flush with shame at having had to interfere in what, but for that strong grip of hers, would have been a low, vulgar intrigue?—flush with a kind of anger at herself for remembering—for, so far as she could foresee them, consciously keeping her husband's path free from similar temptations. Probably he had forgotten. It was better so, for it made it easier for her in a way; easier to go steadily on in the task she had undertaken seven years before, when, as a girl of twenty, she had married her cousin and set herself deliberately to keep him what he still was—Macdonald of Westray. With all his faults he was that; and to Margaret Harver, brought up by her widowed mother, the sister of the late laird, to consider this the finest rôle a man could be called upon to play, and, encouraged

## A SEA MIST

by her only brother in like belief, the fact meant much. The virtues of that long line must be in his blood, she told herself, diluted though it was, sadly, by that of his English mother, who, early widowed, had preferred a London suburb to the solitude of Westray. Poor Ronald ! Who could wonder that, with such an education, he was hazy as to the duties and delights of being a laird ? So the girl's pity had almost grown to love when, fresh from spending the money gained by the sale of the big island, her handsome cousin, looking in her eyes, had agreed that the whole duty of man lay in keeping the position in which Providence had placed him. The mere fact that he was a good fifteen years her senior made this acquiescence all the more flattering ; so she had married him gladly, with heart-whole satisfaction in her task, and a curious ignorance, a curious prescience, of what she was doing.

And now, seven years after, despite the long record which her own steadfastness set against his fallibility, she watched him disappear into the dip with a curious calm, a curious patience.

He was going, she knew, to lounge and smoke and drink in the inn-parlour with men who were his inferior in rank and position. The lawyer over from Oban, the doctor who was seldom

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

sober, the exciseman who had been a skipper, the smart young bank agent across from the big island—they would all be there waiting for the steamer which came into the bay three times a week. What then? There was no other company for him to keep during the winter, and he would not be content in his, as she was in her own—content in trying to live on as the MacDonalds of Westray had always lived. But March was upon them. He would soon be able to go South with the money she had scraped and saved for the purpose, and ere he returned the tide of society would have set north-westwards again. There would be yachts in the bay behind the cliffs—the first safe anchorage on that coast—shooters and fishers in Mr. Begbie's lodge on the big island, perhaps a visitor or two in their own spare rooms. Not many, however, save those content to boat and sea-fish, since the little island held no salmon, no grouse, nothing but those sandy stretches of bent, the patches of arable land, the rough moorland pasture where the cattle grazed, and that isolated headland of rock jutting north-westward, where the sea-fowl were settling like snowflakes as she stood at the window watching her husband pass out of sight.

Poor Ronald! But the vessel she steered was



## A SEA MIST

close on smooth summer waters. Another year was past. He was still Macdonald of Westray. He still stood straight enough in the eyes of the world, and her own inner knowledge of the man and his shortcomings was safely hidden in her heart.

So, as his figure disappeared, she gave what was almost a sigh of relief and turned to her other charge—the child upstairs. As she passed through the narrow hall, a big gaunt woman came out of the kitchen—which gave frankly, openly upon it, without any modern refinements of swing-doors and passages—bringing a stronger whiff of the prevailing peet-reek with her. She had a half-plucked chicken in her hand, and the air of one who seeks a gossip in her shrewd, hard-featured face, where the bands of sandy hair emphasized the narrowness of the high forehead, and the prominent cheekbones accentuated the smallness of the sandy-lashed eyes.

“Ay, puir lammie !” she began, in a solid Aberdeenshire accent, indicating her subject by a dexterous plumping of the bird’s breast. “It’s fat. It was aye in a mood, puir thingie, to be devourin’ the hail world itself, and so it cam quick to its deeth ; but we’ll none o’ us pass oor day, and that’s the truth. So, more by

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

token, I may tell ye, ma'am, that ye're bacon is jest hastenin' awa' to its latter end, and it's time ye were writin' to Glasgi' for more. I'm no ane to go miscaa'ing folk, an' Marion may ken naething o' whaur it's gaun sae quick, but there's nane between me an' truth when I say that I never set eyes before on sic' a cinder-wife. I'm jest beat to be at her wi' tongue an' hand ; but whaur's the use when 'clarty brute's' a' the same's 'my dear' to her."

"You should learn the Gaelic, Tiny," said Margaret, with a smile ; whereat Tiny—her real name was Clementina, but she held grimly to the East Coast diminutive, though her stature would have passed her into the Life Guards—gave a snort of indignant dissent.

"She's nae worth fashing aboot, an' I'll jest leave her to the judgment. She'll ken guid Scots that day, I'se warrent me, though she may haud to it she doesna understan' when I ask her to direc' me to the whereabouts o' an egg. Yon girl Ishbel was a wild lass, a brittle wee monkey that didna ken what she wad be at, but she was better than this raven o' a woman that will no let me find an egg o' my ane."

"Ishbel did not suit me," replied the mistress quietly. In sooth, Ishbel had been too wild for

## A SEA MIST

safety ; and so, with that knowledge of a man's shortcomings still locked safely in her heart, Margaret Macdonald went on her way, leaving Tiny, balked of her gossip, to retreat into the kitchen, there to vent her disappointment on Marion's uncomprehending ears, until, wearied of that, she pulled herself up virtuously by remarking under her breath :

“Weel ! I' best haud my tongue, for it's maist de-moralizin' to live wi' a Balaam o' a body that kens na cursin' frae blessin' !”

## CHAPTER II

### HIS ACT AND DEED

THE man, meanwhile, whose shortcomings were so carefully concealed in a woman's heart, had the deed of sale hidden in his pocket as he sate in the Clachan Inn, which stood, close to high-water mark, on the sandy shore of the bay. It was the only decent cottage on the island, but, despite the possession of a slate roof, and a mahogany chiffonier and horse-hair sofa in the parlour, no more dreary spot wherein to drink bad whisky could be imagined. It was cheerier by far across the flagged entry in the kitchen, where a dozen or so of rough-bearded men lounged in benches with their backs to the wall ; for here a peat-fire burnt bravely below a wide black chimney that carried off some of that mingled fume of tobacco, paraffin, alcohol, and humanity, which was made denser by the sea-mist, as, creeping steadily eastwards, it filtered through every crack and cranny. But even here they were a solemn company, silent for the most

## HIS ACT AND DEED

part, though every now and again a grumble of Gaelic, low-toned, yet emphatic, would come from a corner, and rouse an equally emphatic reply. But it was a persistent company, despite this lack of mutual enjoyment. Once or twice someone would go to the door and look out into the mist, only to return with the remark that "she " would be late ; not that any of the company had much interest in the expected steamer beyond the vague distraction it would bring to the monotony of island life.

In the parlour, however, where a group of better-class men sate ringing the already stained table with fresh toddy-tumbler marks, and the laird, monopolizing the only arm-chair, lounged apart, with his feet on the tiny grate meant for coal, there was more conversation and less comfort. The lawyer from Oban discussed a fishery case with the bank agent, and the doctor, in the combatant stage of befuddlement, dissented from everything, even the one-armed exciseman's remarks on the weather, which were briefly that there would be wind yet behind the fog, since the barometer was falling fast, and that, skipper as he had been, he would not care to be in the captain of the steamer's shoes, having to steer between the Scarva cliffs and Tolstay shoals on

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

a dark night, simply to bring a box of white bread, which was not half such a suitable food for the climate as honest porridge, to Peter Macfie, the merchant. But, then, Captain Trevanon—the title was given him by courtesy—was a Cornishman, and believed in traditionary diets.

“And it is only a shilling the freight will be from Oban,” put in the clerk of the store, nodding his head gravely. “It is not much to be beating about Scarva on a winter’s night for a shilling, whatever.”

The doctor turned on him instantly. “You forget, sir, the—the incalculable advantages of—of constant communication to the crofters”—the alliteration was almost too much for his enunciation. “They are enabled to send away the—the tons of fish which swarm in—on these coasts where natural harbours——”

“Devil a fish whatever that has gone aboard from Westray since the Government is sending the steamer,” interrupted the clerk obstinately.

As a rule, Ronald Macdonald would have been only too eager to seize this opportunity for inveighing against the reckless expenditure of public money in subsidizing ships uselessly in order to open up a trade which was non-existent ; but to-night he sate silent, thinking of that document



## HIS ACT AND DEED

in his pocket. It had lain there for three days in a stamped and addressed envelope, ready for signature. But he had not signed it—why he scarcely knew, for he had fully made up his mind to follow the advice contained in a letter from his brother Evan, which lay in his pocket also—namely, to sign sharp, and say nothing to his wife till the deed was beyond recall. He meant to do this fully, yet something had held him back hitherto—not any thought of Margaret's anger or grief, for, without realizing it, he had really been drifting beyond her influence for months past, as men of his stamp will drift from their moorings when the first hint of old age warns them that time is short, and renews the restlessness of youth in a passionate claim to enjoy life while they have it. It was a vague personal dislike, now that the time had come for it, to that severing of the tie between himself and Westray, which he had derided when speaking to his wife. In his heart of hearts he felt that she had in a measure been right when she had said :

“You cannot escape altogether. It is in the blood. You were born Macdonald of Westray, as your fathers were, and you will die Macdonald of Westray, as they died.”

Ridiculous nonsense ! And yet——

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

He rose to knock the ashes out of his pipe, and shrug his shoulders contemptuously. In that case, he told himself, he would need to go out sharp, since the deed would be signed, sealed, and delivered that night before he went home. He had come down to the inn on purpose to find some strangers to act as witnesses, who would not gossip about it ; and to pin his resolution down, as it were, he had that day sent a letter to the mutual agent in whose hands the purchase money lay, telling him that the deed would follow by the next post, and asking him to transfer the £10,000 to his account and conclude the transaction. So the incoming steamer would take both the deed and the witnesses, thus enabling him to keep his own counsel. And if he hurried up his visit to London a little, it would be possible to keep the sale from being public property till he could break the fact to Margaret from a distance. That, his experience taught him, was always the best way with women ; besides, to tell truth, he did not want to see the pain which, nevertheless, he was determined to give.

“No sign of her yet, Angus ?” asked Captain Trevanon, as a big black young man in oilskins looked into the parlour. Big Angus, who had no English to speak of, gave a laconic “No,” and

## HIS ACT AND DEED

passed on to whisper in the doctor's ear. The latter laid down his glass severely.

"Certainly not, sir—certainly not. It's—it's a disgrace to the community."

He was a very small man with a hatchet face, clean-shaven, or, rather, it was meant to be clean-shaven. But as this depended on the steadiness of his hands, Dr. Gilchrist's patients judged by his efficiency for the practical exercise of his profession by his capacity for shaving himself, and in extreme cases of stubbliness kept him under lock and key till he could use his razor decently. Barring this weakness, he was all a physician should be—clever, kind-hearted, reckless in his expenditure of time and trouble over every old wife in the parish. Big Angus therefore paid no heed to his invariable refusal of first aid to the wounded, and whispered him again.

"Mary *vohr*,"\* he repeated thickly in English; "not Mary *vech*.† That makes a difference. But what does she want me for? She's had thirteen already, and I won't abet the increase of pauper population on that croft. There are fifteen souls on the parish from the Scarva croft already, and as parish officer and health officer I refuse—mark you, sir, I *refuse*—to have any more."

\* Big Mary.

† Little Mary.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Here Angus, still confident, whispered to the doctor again.

“Confound you, you stupid ass!” exclaimed the latter, stumbling to his feet. “Bad, is she? Why didn’t you say that before? Poor soul! As if thirteen wasn’t enough—though what possesses people to be born a foggy night——” He paused, as if the mist had got into his brain, and stood gauging his own fitness for the task before him by a furtive caress to his chin. The laird, standing by the grate, laughed suddenly, noisily.

“It’s good enough to die in, anyhow, doctor, and you’ve my full permission to turn your attention that way. With a poor rate ten shillings in the pound we can afford a few deaths. There are twenty-seven squatters on the Scarva croft, and not a well-doing one among the lot, except Ishbel. She’s a pretty girl, if you like.”

Big Angus’s black eyes turned to the speaker suspiciously, as if he did not care to hear his sister’s name from those lips.

“That ferrying business over the bay to Tol-stay is a blind,” went on the laird, as the doctor fumbled to see what drugs he had with him—for he generally carried a hospital outfit in his pockets. “They are thieves and wreckers. I believe they could tell the whereabouts of every

## HIS ACT AND DEED

log of mahogany that has been stolen from the flotsam-jetsam pile these fifteen years, and yet they pay no rent——”

“How can they?” put in the bank agent, who held Radical views on the land question, combatively. “They can’t make money out of that croft. They never were intended to. When your grandfather, Mr. Macdonald, gave old John—who died last year—the best house and land, he was his kelp-burner——”

“And what has that to do with it?” interrupted the laird angrily. “Can’t a man mention his rents nowadays without having kelp flung at his head? I only wish, sir, there *was* kelp in the question. I shouldn’t be the pauper I am if there were. And I maintain that the Scarva folk are an ill-doing lot.”

“The crime in the district is small, whatever,” put in another speaker.

“Who said it wasn’t?” interrupted the owner sharply. “Of course it’s small. Westray——” He paused a moment. “And who said that twenty-seven people could live on forty acres or so of stones or sand with a peat bog, and some bents for grazing? Not I. I’ve been driving that fact into the fools’ ears these seven years, and I’d have turned them out, neck and crop, last

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

November if Mrs. Macdonald hadn't objected to its being done in the winter."

"It is a pity," began the Oban lawyer, with sudden interest. "There is always risk in not carrying out a decree——"

"But the dictates of ordinary humanity," blurted out the bank agent, red hot.

"I don't care a curse for anybody's dictates," broke in the laird as hotly, his head in the air, his whole figure pulled together. "But I wasn't going to have the Land Leaguers scoring a point over Macdonald of Westray's barbarity. As if we hadn't managed our estates before their time, and kept our tenants loyal. In the '15 we took three hundred men to the Royal Standard. I'd get them now, I believe, if it came to a pinch; and humanity or no humanity, Land League or no Land League, that crew of lazy squatters leaves my land this summer, or——" He paused suddenly; before that deed in his locket, before his own warmth, before the knowledge that Margaret had, indeed, been right—he would be Macdonald of Westray till he died.

The doctor's fumbling having ceased in an expletive, caused a diversion. Something was not there which might be wanted. He must go to his own house, half a mile away, and fetch it.

## HIS ACT AND DEED

Angus, meanwhile, had better employ himself in borrowing the inn lantern, since for all the generations to come one of them was not going to risk a broken neck over Scarva cliffs in the fog.

“And there will be wind behind it,” persisted the exciseman doggedly, “or may I never see Cornwall again. Though for cliffs, they’re poor stuff. Before I lost my arm——”

This being the invariable prelude to long-winded stories about the skipper’s prowess in seafowling, the bank agent, who had been talking to Big Angus, said hurriedly :

“You’re right, captain. There’s a heavy swell coming up to the point, as it is, from the sou’-west. Angus doesn’t think she’ll come in to-night ; it’s thick as a fleece, he says.”

“God save all ships at sea !” remarked the old skipper grievously. This, his only petition, he put up religiously whenever the weather was not to his liking.

The Oban lawyer rose and put on his ulster.

“Then I’m for the swift steamer at Loch Einvar. I can give you a lift in my machine, Campbell,” he added, turning to the bank agent ; “and you, sir, if you’re in a hurry, as I am.”

But the man he addressed, a commercial



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

traveller from Glasgow, elected for another glass of whisky-and-water instead of a fourteen-mile drive and a sea-ford apt to be risky at spring tides, when the shelving sand-bank, with a mid-rib of rock which connected the little island with the big one, had three feet of water on the road.

“I’d have a look for myself before I gave her up,” put in the exciseman, following the others. “They are no sailors on this coast. Lordy! when I was a youngster I’ve steered into Haverford Bay with a wind round the Head driving me right on to the wickedest rocks, fit to make these land-lubbers’ hair stand on end.”

His short, stout, lop-sided figure, with a nautical roll in it, left the room empty save for the bagman at the table, the laird still standing before the fireplace, with one hand in his pocket, and Big Angus, with the lantern, waiting for the doctor at the door. Five minutes afterwards, when the latter returned, looking perceptibly smoother about the face, and in a great hurry to be off, the two first occupants were in the same places, but Big Angus was reported to have gone for a dram into the kitchen.

“Pernicious habit,” fussed Dr. Gilchrist. “Macallum’s stuff is so vile, too; there’s creeping paralysis in every drop. I always insist on his

## HIS ACT AND DEED

keeping my own brand. It's safer, though he does stick on the price, and I haven't money to lavish on publicans like Angus. Where the deuce he gets it from I can't think ; not, I'm sure, by legitimate acts and deeds."

Something seemed to strike the laird's humour, for he laughed again, loudly, noisily.

"It was my act and deed this time, and I paid him for it. Great God ! what's that ?"

It was a curious muffled sound rising above the measured beat of the breakers on the northern sands, which, even in calm weather, ceases not day or night upon the western isles. It seemed to shudder through the fog, closing white as a fleece round the group of dark figures, which in an instant was standing outside listening, waiting.

"Hark ! There 'tis ! She's on the rocks !" called the old skipper, his face set Scarva-ways already, as the dull boom came through the almost luminous mist once more. "Mr. Macdonald, they'll obey your orders. Tell some of them to run round to the station and rouse Malcolm with the rockets ; and Angus, here, who knows every inch of the cliffs, should climb out and fire the old beacon on the point. It might guide a boat, though if the wind rises——"

As he spoke, the hissing rush of a bigger wave

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

on the unseen sand beside them told that far out at sea, beyond the fog, the wind *had* risen, and that below the cliffs there must be wild work already. One or two of the men who had turned instinctively to the rough pier, where a few boats were moored, paused as instinctively, looking at each other ; for they were Celts, and therefore, as the old skipper had said, landlubbers by race.

“There will be more chance of help by the rocks,” they agreed, “if she has struck close in.”

So they followed the laird and Angus, who were already hidden in the fleece of deadening, smothering fog, which seemed to hide the very darkness itself. The laird came first, Angus at his heels carrying the lantern which had been meant to bring help to the threshold of birth, and now showed, in bare foot by foot, that wild pathway to the gate of death. They had fallen into their hereditary places these two, the laird and his henchman.

“Keep a care, Westray ; keep a care,” came the latter’s voice, as his leader, reckless in his haste, edged the cliff line too close, and a rattle of loose stones gave warning of danger.

“All right, man ; all right. Keep you the light close, that’s all.”

## HIS ACT AND DEED

And now right in the very path, blocking the way, was a wall of rough boulders, a ragged rounded thatch, a faint glint of light through a single pane. They were on the Scarva croft, among the squatters' huts.

"It is kindling for t' beacon," explained Angus, as he dived inwards, and the laird pulled up, waiting for the light again. A babble of shrill women's voices came through the opening door, above the man's eager, impatient demands; but above both rose that strangest of all sounds—the cry of a new-born babe. So there was another squatter on the Scarva croft, thought the laird impatiently, as he waited. The fog had begun to condense in heavy drops of rain, sure sign that the wind was at hand; the long roll of the breakers rose louder and louder; and behind him, through the mist, came the sound of men's voices as they too went cliffwards.

"Angus!" he called impatiently, and then forgot his impatience altogether as a girl stepped out of the doorway.

"It is getting wet Mr. Macdonald will be, but it is Dugald's oil-coat I'm bringing, if Westray will no be minding," she said, with a mischievous challenge in her tone. It was Ishbel Mackenzie—Ishbel, the girl who was too pretty for safety.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

A minute afterwards Angus, dashing out again with a flaming pot of peats in one hand, the lantern in the other, heard the unmistakable sound of a kiss in the darkness, an unmistakable giggle, and paused, even in his hurry, to hurl abuse in Gaelic at his sister's head. The girl fled inwards with an affected little shriek of dismay, but the laird laughed.

"Put my coat inside, Angus," he said carelessly. "I can't get this thing on over it, and we may have wet work before us. Take care! it's got my watch in it."

The flaming peats showed both their faces clearly—the one contemptuously indifferent, the other dark with passion.

A moment afterwards the laird, with the lantern which Angus had set down in order to take the coat, was far ahead, leaving his henchman to follow sullenly with the flaming peats.

They had drifted apart again these two, the laird and his henchman, but the fact did not seem to trouble the former. There was, indeed, a jubilant look on his face, as if he felt a new grip on the pleasure of life, when he joined the group of men who, gaining by his delay, stood before him on the outermost point of the headland, peering seawards, listening with all their ears.

## HIS ACT AND DEED

But no sound was to be heard save that rising roll of the breakers, and—in the hush which comes between wave and wave—their own voices coming back to them from the fog.

“Send up a rocket, Malcolm,” said the skipper. “They’ll have to be close in, though, for it to be of any use. The beacon itself scarce shows, even here.”

Scarcely. Though but twenty yards off, the great pile of blazing peats was but a reddish glow, and the rocket, hissing upwards, pierced the dense white mist with a faint trail of fire and then disappeared. There was a chill in the fog now, with the whole wide Atlantic before you, and Ronald Macdonald, despite the oilskin coat, despite that quickening of his pulses, shivered.

“What’s that?” he cried suddenly, moving a step nearer the cliff’s edge. “There’s someone calling, surely—listen!”

Was it a call, or only the cry of a sea-bird disturbed by the rising spray?

The old skipper, flat on his stomach, craned over the last jag of rock, and half a dozen others on their knees bent to catch the faintest sound. Only the laird stood listening, his face, with a sort of smile on it, looking seawards.

“There it is again,” he said quietly. “I can

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

hear it quite distinctly. It is a man on the rocks below—poor devil !”

The skipper drew back hastily. “By the Lord, you’re right, sir ! I hear him too. Quick ! some of you fellows, a rope ! The tide’s making every second, and if we are to have a chance of getting him up—— Here, Malcolm, you fool ! take a bight round that rock, and a noose at the end. Have none of you chaps ever been down a cliff before ? Now, then, who’s going ?”

There was a pause. A dozen hands were on the rope to hold it, that was all, though Big Angus peered over the cliff curiously. He knew the spot well—had been down it before now by daylight, almost without a rope. What he feared was not the descent, it was the drowning man at the bottom—the man whose life, if tales were true, would be given in exchange for his own death within the year. He seemed to feel the grip of the drowning hands at his throat ; he saw the same fear in the eyes of the other men.

“Curse you all !” shouted the skipper. “If I’d two arms instead of one, I wouldn’t need to ask you Highland cowards. Mr. Macdonald, sir, isn’t there a man on your island——”

“If you’ll stand out of the way,” interrupted



## HIS ACT AND DEED

the laird fiercely, "I'll show you. Here, you there, give me the rope."

Big Angus stepped back with an oath. "It isn't Westray himself s'all," he protested sullenly ; but something beyond resentment at the taunt had set Ronald Macdonald's blood on fire. He had flung the oilskin coat aside, but the pretty face of the giver, though he cared not a jot for it, and the sense of relief at having shaken off his shackles at last, remained with him, making him feel young, strong, reckless.

So this, too, should be his act and deed. The words recurred to him idly.

"Hold fast, men ! Give me time and pull up if I signal," he said, as, with the rope scientifically knotted under the skipper's direction, he slipped over the last point of rock into the white mist, and found his first foothold.

The men above held their breath and listened for the next. He was Westray. Ay, ay ! he was Westray, whatever.

And Big Angus, at the outermost verge, holding a pad of his own oilskins and the laird's under the rope, to prevent it fraying on the rock, kept his hand on the strained strands to feel the faintest signal.

So they waited, till suddenly a wild wail rose

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

above the rush of the breakers, and a cold wind blew in their faces from the whirling of white wings seen faintly through the mist.

“ ’Tis the sea-birds,” said Big Angus in Gaelic, as he drew back from the stroke of a pinion close to his face. “Westray is so far, and it is easy work from where they sit.”

The men at the rope gave a sigh of relief. So far, good. But there was the man still—the man whose life might have to be saved in exchange. The broad white wings of the startled sea-birds, rising out of the gulf dimly, might be the wings of a soul! . . .

“*Ha, ha, ha!*” came the laugh of the great black-backed gull from the darkness.

“She’s slack now; he’s down,” said Angus. “Westray’s down safe.” And he, too, gave a sigh of relief.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MAN FROM THE SEA

"Is she slack still?" asked the skipper anxiously. He bent, watch in hand, over the lantern. The laird had asked for time, but it was nigh on ten minutes since the request had been made; the tide was flowing, and though the fog lightened a bit with the fitful wind which now blew in puffs, the breakers below grew noisier every instant.

"Slack she is," answered Angus.

"Then pull her taut, man, and signal; it's time he gave a sign."

The rope came in a foot or two slowly, then paused, Angus's lean fingers feeling it like a pulse.

"Heave, men, heave!" he cried suddenly in the Gaelic, as he slipped down to that first foothold and held the rope clear of it. "It is no signal, but a dead weight. He must have come to harm. Heave steady! it's Westray at the end."

He was down to the next drop as he spoke, clinging to the rocks like a limpet, keeping the rope

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

clear of them with his feet, eager, excited, since, when all was said and done, it was the laird who must be kept clear of the cliff.

The little crowd, which had by this time gathered on the verge, pressed closer—a dozen or more wild-looking men from Scarva, vociferous in advice—Peter Macfie, the merchant, smug in a smooth great-coat ; some half-naked children, shivering and curious ; the doctor, down on his knees now by the red glow of the beacon, preparing for work, since that cry of a dead weight meant that something needing his care would come up with the rope.

“ Bring him here, captain, sharp,” he called to the skipper, who, down on that first foot-hold in his excitement, was swinging the lantern wide over the misty gulf, and urging, cautioning, blessing, cursing, in a breath. But the night had become suddenly full of clamour : men’s voices calling to each other above the rush of the sea, and above both the wailing laugh of the gulls, as, startled from new resting-places by that dead weight coming up on the rope, their broad white wings, wheeling in circles, flickered in and out of the beacon’s glow.

“ *Ha, ha, ha ! Ha, ha, ha !* ”

“ Heave, men—heave ! Now steady—he has

## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

him, he has him !” shouted the skipper, as Angus caught recklessly at something beneath him, and the next minute staggered up with his burden to those crowding faces.

“ He’s safe—Westray’s safe ! Praise be to God, he’s safe ! The laird’s safe !”

The shout drowned Big Angus’s sobbing laugh of sheer satisfaction as he laid his burden beside the doctor.

“ Now, stand back—stand back a bit, men, and let me see where I am,” fussed the latter, bending over the unconscious figure.

“ My God !” he cried sharply, “ it — it — isn’t——”

Big Angus, who had bent also, gave a strange cry—a sort of faint yell, half savage, half timid :

“ It’s the Man from the Sea—the Man from the Sea ! It’s not Westray at all ! Oh, curses on the clinging hands. They’ve killed the laird—they’ve killed Westray.”

There was a circle of wild faces round the new-comer in an instant—faces fearful yet menacing, and the doctor mechanically thrust his arm out over the man’s body as if to guard it ; for, in truth, there was almost murder in these eyes of hate, where the superstition of their fathers had sprung to life in a second.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

"The Man from the Sea !" they echoed—"the Man from the Sea !"

"Don't be a fool, man !" exclaimed Dr. Gilchrist. "The laird's down there yet. He must have tied the rope on to this man. Quick with it ! He's waiting for it yet."

Big Angus passed his hand over his eyes as if to brush away something, and with a cry was back on the verge, followed by the others. The rope, weighted with a stone, slid down swiftly, and Big Angus—no coward when his blood was up, and the man to be saved was no stranger from the sea, but the laird himself—slid after it to the next foothold. It was sheer drop hence to the gulls' nests below. He craned over, shouting, but there was no sound, no signal.

"Send up another rocket, Malcolm !" called the skipper. "It's lighter now ; we might almost see the wreck, if there is one."

This time the flare showed the mist shredded here and there by the wind, and drifting before it in fragment, leaving clear shifting spaces here and there ; but there was no sign of disaster save in that unconscious figure over which the doctor was busying himself.

"His right ankle's broken, anyhow," he said, looking up, "and the sooner he is in shelter, the

## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

better. The house is nearest, but——” He gave a quick glance to the cliff.

The skipper nodded.

“They’ll find him yet, if he is to be found,” he replied, with an oath. “They’re plucky enough now, so there is no use in frightenin’ folk before we know for sure. See here, doctor. If you were to send him”—he nodded again towards the figure on the ground—“up to Westray House with a message to look after him from the laird, how would that do?”

The doctor nodded also.

“It would keep her quiet, certainly; and she mustn’t come down here. I’ll try it.”

So, through the wind and the rain which was now replacing the mist, the man from the sea, slung in a plaid between men’s shoulders, was carried over the point to Westray House.

“It is tellin’ the troos, and nothin’ else I will be,” said the eldest of the party, a stern old man who was a light among the Seceders, when he got his instructions.

“Dash it all!” bawled the skipper angrily. “Isn’t it the truth that the laird saved him; that there’s been a wreck; and that we shall be coming up soon, you fool?”

But the doctor knew his man better, and



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

changed him for one less scrupulous. He might have saved himself the trouble, for Margaret was upstairs in the nursery when the crunching of feet upon the gravel sent Tiny to the door with a preconceived notion in her head, since more than once the laird had been brought home in that fashion from the Clachan Inn.

“Whisht ! ye thrawn idiots !” she said, in a fierce whisper to the over-loud attempts at explanation in limited English of the men who stood hesitating with their burden on the threshold. “D’ye no ken that a fou’ man comes hame cantier than a corp to the gude-wife, if he can ? Aff wi’ y’re boots, ye that hae them, and bring him awa’ to his ain room till I sort him to sleep, puir lammie ! afore she sees him. A man must be sair overtaken to look drunk in his bed, an’ ye s’ud aye put the best appearance ye can on ither folks’ backslidin’s ; sae come awa’ wi’ him cannily, as ye wad to his funeral.”

In truth, it was grimly like one, as the four men, with bare feet, shuffled through the narrow, dark entry, and, led by the gaunt figure bearing a light and whispering fierce caution, carried their burden silently to the laird’s own room half-way up the stairs.

“Now, whisht—whisht, wi’ ye,” whispered

## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

Tiny, with triumphant caution, when their task was over, and—still hidden by the plaid—the man they had carried lay on the bed where generations of Macdonalds had slept their first and last sleep. “Least said’s soonest mended, and we are nane o’ us perfect, east or west, let alane Westray folk ; sae gang yere ways to the back kitchen, an’ wait till I bring ye oot a drap whisky, like decent bodies. Mercy on us a’ ! Wha’s this in Macdonald’s bed ?”

The last, which rose in loud dismay, was the result of her proceeding, as she thought, to dispose the laird for a respectable slumber ; and her sonorous voice echoing through the house, the nursery - door opened hastily, and Margaret, dressed in her white evening gown, peered over the balustrade of the landing above.

“What is it, Tiny ?” she called. “What’s the matter ?” Then, seeing the light in her room below, and stealthy forms creeping downstairs, she, too, jumped to a conclusion, and her heart gave a sickening throb of regret and useless shame. So for an instant she stood gripping the rail with her firm white hands, taken unawares ; for it was still early, and she had not even begun to fret about her husband’s return, though, in a way, she had known what she might possibly have to

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

face. It was this dim, disregarded fear which had sent her, out of sheer combativeness, to a book full of colour, poetry, passion—a book, briefly, full of those things which her life lacked, a lack which, however, she taught herself to deny and despise.

But now her eyes were soft with the mere reading of such dreams, and though, after a second, she forced herself to seek what lay before her downstairs, she paused involuntarily on her way to shrink against the wall, and lay her head and her open palms against it, as if she sought a rest, a hold somewhere, a kindly touch on hers during the long penance of patience which was, which must be, hers. God ! what a life it was ! How could she bear it ? How could she go on and on without a change ?

Such moments of utter discouragement come to most, bringing a sort of comfort in the thought of one's own martyrdom with them ; but Margaret Macdonald was prouder than most. Her own shrinking repelled her, the inarticulate passion of her resentment against Fate startled her reserve. She brushed them both from her with a sudden swift gesture and passed on to confront Tiny with reproaches. For the attempt at concealment, which she guessed, roused her pride :

## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

it was as if she was too weak to bear her full burden.

“Why?” she began peremptorily, as she entered the room where the latter still stood, open-mouthed, aghast before her own surprise.

“Why?” echoed Tiny. “Ye may weel ask why, ma’am. Me, Clementina Catto, come to years o’ discretion, an’ he a Gideon-fleece-o’-a-man jest dreepin’ wi’ moisture amang the clean sheets—an’ the mangle awa’ to Glasgi’ to be sorted. But, there! it’s not his doin’, puir lammie! that he’s here, jest a Jonah-o’-a-man frae the sea.”

“A man from the sea!” repeated Margaret mechanically. There was no doubt about it. She had seen too many pitiful figures lying on the strand where, after winter storms, all sorts of strange waifs and strays came to crave rest from Mother Earth, not to recognize the signs of that vain struggle with the sea which leaves a strong man bruised and broken.

And this was a strong man—a man of her own age, a little younger, perhaps, with such a fair white skin beyond the tan of his neck and wrists. She could not help noticing it, even in the hurry of her surprise. There was a deep cut on his temple, and one bare foot doubled itself strangely

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

as he lay. But he was not dead. She could see that at a glance, and her amazement gave place immediately to action.

“We had better get him between the blankets at once,” she said. “And, Tiny, run down and tell Marion to bring up hot bottles, and some whisky; and, Tiny, if the men are still there, ask them about it. Send one of them up here, if you can’t understand.”

Apparently, however, she did, though it took her some time; for when she came up again—which was not until Margaret, having done all she could in the interval, was losing patience—she had a perfectly plain, reasonable story to tell. The steamer or some other ship, it was supposed, had been wrecked off Scarva Point in the mist. Anyhow, the man had been found on the rocks there, and had been saved by the laird and others, who were still down at the cliffs, as there was a chance yet of saving others; the doctor, however, would be up ere long to look after this one.

Margaret gave a little shiver. The thought of men fighting helplessly with the sea within reach of arms eager to succour always seemed to her worse than that silent, solitary struggle against hopeless odds, which left the victim, as it were, unvanquished.

## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

“And the laird?” she asked lightly, though her tone was soft, with a vague remorse at having for once misjudged his occupation.

“It was the laird sent him up frae the sea,” said Tiny, turning away suddenly on pretence of fetching something from the next room.

“An’ me pitten’ him in the ither’s place,” she murmured, as she stalked back with an armful of blankets. “Puir lammie, puir lammie! It’s just a clear finger o’ Providence, but it may be wrang yet. Please God, it will. But onyway I’ll no hae that Lot’s-wife-o’-a-Marion transformin’ us a’ to pillars o’ saut tears before oor time. There’s mony a nicht o’ sorrow turned to joy i’ the mornin’; sae we’ll nae trust to a paraffin lamp, but wait for God’s sun to tell us the truth.”

So, after a time, the doctor—brought in by Tiny stanchly—had the same tale to tell. Half Westray was still on the cliff, seeking to save life. And the laird was there, too. It was he who went down first with the rope—he who had saved the man.

“The gomeril!” muttered Tiny, gathering the peats together decisively, so that the sparks flew upwards with the grey dust flakes. “It’s ill wisdom to ca’ spilt milk cream. An’ the laird, puir lammie! but dust an’ ashes, wi’ nae richt tae

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

gang up wi' a fluff like a prophet, for a' he's lettin' faa' his mantle upon anither man."

Yet when the dawn came, and with the first rays of the sun full on the Scarva cliffs, Margaret stood at the window looking at them with a sort of dull wonder in her eyes, it was Tiny who said softly :

"It was a fair end, my dearie—a fair end to change his life for anither's. We mustna grudge him that for his excusin'."

For another ! Margaret turned, and, walking quickly to the bed, stood looking down at the still unconscious stranger resentfully. The stress and strain had passed from his face ; he lay as if asleep, and once more his air of youth and strength struck her—this time with a vague sense of injury.

"What right," she began, pushing the hair back from her forehead as she looked up again in a sort of passionate appeal—"what right, I say, has this man——"

"It's little right ony o' us hae tae git our fingers into this world's pie, lit alane the next," interrupted Tiny dryly. "But he's just God's gift frae the sea to someone—a woman, maybe, that's wantin' him, wearyin' for him. An' she s'all get him, too, if I've aught to do wi' it ; so I'll awa' an' lay hands on the doctor ; he's no safe whaur he is,



## THE MAN FROM THE SEA

puir lammie !” she continued to herself, as, with rough wisdom, she left Margaret alone for a time and went downstairs. “ It’s no’ as if the corp had come hame, and there wad be the comfort o’ a funeral for folk to talk it ower at their leesure.”

So she walked like a grenadier into the dining-room, where a group of men lingered, warming themselves, and talking vaguely over their night-long quest, unwilling, as men are after such scenes, to part and so end all hope ; and, on pretence of his needing a blink of sleep, she lured Dr. Gilchrist away to the spare room, where she locked him in solemnly. Then, having done her duty generally to frail humanity, she sate down on the stairs and cried like a child—cried out of sheer pity for the dead laird who had disappeared so mysteriously, for the new-made widow who had lost so little, for the stranger who lay between life and death, and might never know that another man had gone down to the darkness in his place.

And then, in more restrained fashion, she wept a few tears for the doctor, who was the “ puirest lammie ” of them all. Finally, giving herself, as general shepherd, the dregs of her commiseration, she retired to the kitchen and bade Marion forthwith slay two chickens, since they would surely be needed for the sick man, and life must go for life.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STRAND

“IF it does not come in with the next tide, it will not come at all to Westray,” said Big Angus, as he slouched moodily along the fringes of seaweed on the strand.

A strange, wild place was this strand, which stretched between the big and the little islands, save, indeed, when the tide was at the flood ; for then it lay green and shimmering, a shallow lake where, on most days, you could see the crabs crawling among the seaweed, and the cuddies sniffing curiously at each new object brought by the current to their world. But when the tide was out, and it showed yellow and spotted with brown seaweed, with a stream of iridescent peat-water curving through it, there was an evil look about it, reminding one of a snake creeping over a spread leopard skin. And its look fitted its nature, for it was full of treacherous quicksands, so that those who crossed its two miles as a short-

## THE STRAND

cut instead of going round six by that mid-rib of rocky road which even spring-tides spared, had to steer their way, sailor fashion, using landmarks by day, the stars by night ; unless, indeed, the light in the little laird's nursery was burning, for that did not wheel like the stars, but remained always as the last point to which feet could steer in crossing from the big island to Westray House, and hope ere long to find the dry land of the shelving point, and not the wide Atlantic, beneath their tread. Dangerous as it was, however, the islanders could ill have spared their strand, for by reason of the inward draw, when, at half-tide, the sea rushed in to fill up the depression, it caught more flotsam and jetsam than any other on these stormy Western coasts.

Most of the roof-trees, such as they were, had been found on it—stray drifts from the mahogany and teak forests of the Amazon—and scarcely a house did not possess some relic of a ship that had foundered, God knows where. There was no saying, in fact, what the strand might not bring, from oranges and apples for the bairns to a half-drowned foreign sailor as a husband for one of the pretty, dark-eyed Celtic maidens, who consented cheerfully to be wooed in Swedish or High Dutch. Margaret Macdonald herself had

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

had such an ancestor in the far past ; and, when her island neighbours irritated her, would claim kin with the Vikings whose graves and dunes were to be seen on the low hills and moorland lakes.

So there was no doubt where to search for the laird's body. There was no lack of searchers, either, but to no purpose. Tide followed tide, and neither the landmarks nor the skymarks, nor even the light in his little son's window, guided the laird's feet home ; and the searchers dropped off one by one to begin life without him, shaking their heads, and saying that he was either caught in a rock or drifting in the Gulf Stream towards the snow and ice.

Big Angus was one of the last to give up hope. Long after the others went home he used to linger by the fringes of seaweed, and his keen eyes roved far into the west for a hint of anything yet to come.

"It is a poor crop you will be having this year, Angus," said Red Dugald, who owned the next miserable field or two on the Scarva croft, "if you waste time seeking for dead men. A creel or two of seaweed is worth more than the laird ever was or will be to the land."

Angus, with a muttered remark about folk minding their own business, walked on moodily,

## THE STRAND

grinding his heels into the soft sand. Red Dugald looked after him angrily. "'Tis too bad," he said to his neighbours—who, like himself, were taking advantage of what the sea had brought by carrying the great piles of seaweed beyond high-water mark, whence they could fetch it as manure for their fields at leisure—"when Ishbel slaves over the weed like a horse. She has been up at dawn this week past to get the first crop of the tide."

"Horo ! Dugald, man," jeered one of the others ; "she will make the better wife for that when the day comes. And as for Angus, it would not be the first time he had found things in dead men's pockets that were worth the finding."

"There would not be much worth having in the laird's pockets whatever," remarked a sardonic-faced man. He was the blacksmith, and, as such, an ardent Radical. "It would need two thieves for that job—one to fetch, the other to carry away."

"And that might be, for all we know," said a pert-looking girl, whose lover was helping her on with a creel ; "for there's a pair of them, Ishbel and Angus, haunting the strand day and night, like *Kate-gorach*, listening for her dead man's feet ! I'm not saying aught against Ishbel,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Dugald, so you needn't glower at me ; but one Kate is enough in a parish."

So Angus himself thought, an hour or so afterwards. It was almost dark by that time ; the sun was already down, and the long line of the sea showed purple-black against the red west, though the waves in-shore, curbing themselves in the slack between ebb and flow, gleamed green. But there was still one group of seaweed-set boulders which he must examine, since it might hold something—which surely did hold something ! For what was that dark patch upon the ground beyond it ? He gave a swift glance to see that he was not observed, then stole rapidly towards it. Yes, it was a figure !—a figure prone, face downwards, on the sand. Was it the laird—the laird come home in his shirt-sleeves to tell folk that he had left something behind him in that cottage on Scarva croft—something which had been stolen ? Angus was close now to the dark patch, and he paused with a sigh of relief.

"Get up, you old fool !" he said roughly ; "the tide turned ten minutes ago."

But that figure, fool though it was, knew better. It rose slowly on one elbow, the other wizened arm held aloft, clutching at the air, beckoning to something invisible.

## THE STRAND

“Come,” it whispered coaxingly — “come quick! Listen! It is a man’s feet—a dead man’s feet—coming! coming! come!”

The last word was an eldritch laugh, as Kate the fool sprang to her feet like a jack-in-the-box, cutting capers and nodding to the dim sea, as if she saw something there to welcome.

What? The question sent the blood curdling to Angus Mohr’s heart; for what did Kate the fool see when she listened every day for the footsteps of the tide? She had listened for them, so folk said, for fifty years, ever since they had brought her drowned lover home to her; going down near the slack to gather shells, seaweeds, God knows what, and then—prone upon the sands—to wait, chuckling over her treasures as gossip said she had chuckled over her lover, until the first beat of the returning sea gained on the land once more with its promise of new gifts. She never made a mistake, no matter how far off she waited. The first half-inch of whispering flow brought her to her feet, full of beckoning welcome. It was not canny. How could she hear the tide? Whose feet did she welcome—the laird’s? Angus, big though he was, fell back at the thought that it might be his own—his own, coming drowned from the ferry at Tolstay. For



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

it was apt to be rough there in wild weather, and every soul knew that Kate-*gorach* was one of those who see what other folk cannot—one of those who persist, too, in seeing all the uncomfortable things—coffins and open graves, dead faces, funerals, empty shoes—as if life held naught but death. A half-savage terror leapt to his eyes—the terror that does not shrink from making horrors of its own—when the sight of another figure coming along the sands recalled him to more sober sense. It was Ishbel, his sister, her pretty face half hidden in the folds of the shawl wound round her head in island fashion.

“Have you found anything, Angus?” she called eagerly.

“Nothing,” he answered sullenly; “and nothing will be found now, Ishbel—nothing. But have a care, lass, or I will tell Red Dugald things he would not like to hear. So keep a still tongue in your head. But if you light-lie me, I’ll light-lie you, and there was enough——”

“It is a lie!” cried the girl vehemently. “You know there was no harm at all—it was not my fault——”

“I don’t care a bit of burnt heather whose fault it is,” he interrupted doggedly; “but have

## THE STRAND

a care, or I'll tell Dugald the sort of lass you are."

"If you dare—if you dare!" she exclaimed; then, seeing the look on his handsome, reckless face, she stamped her foot passionately and walked away. There was no use talking to Angus, she told herself, when he was in that temper.

But if the laird's body did not turn up to show that it had left something behind it in the little cottage on the Scarva croft, there was time yet to make her brother hear reason.

And Angus, also, going his way to the big house on Westray Point with his daily bulletin of failure, told himself there was time, since the dead laird had not come home to bear witness against the living; though, when all was said and done, it had never been counted theft to take aught from the dead and drowned.

So Kate-*gorach* was left alone on the sands, chuckling over her treasures of the deep. They were not much that tide—only a lobster-claw and a lucky nut which had floated in the Gulf Stream from Brazil; but they satisfied the fool, and ere she entered the wigwam of a hut on Scarva, where she was boarded by the parish with stern old Flora Mackenzie, she hid them

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

carefully in the peat-stack outside ; for Flora confiscated the "filthy trash," as she called it, remorselessly whenever she could lay her hands upon it. Not that Kate grieved for long, since the next tide always brought her other treasures. Those dead men's feet never ceased in the bringing of gifts.

## CHAPTER V

### A HIATUS

UP in the big house, the week following on the laird's disappearance into the unknown and the stepping out from it of a new face had passed, as such times generally do pass, in vague excitement, almost pleasurable confusion. And of the latter, as Tiny said, there was so much that she could scarce tell what she would be at, a funeral or a christening, since, though the blinds were drawn down at other windows, there was one where the sun shone in on a new face, on a new denizen of this world, who was helpless as a new-born babe. For the man from the sea still lay unconscious, owing, Dr. Gilchrist said, to a deep cut at the back of his head, which might, which probably would, prevent him, even when he came back to consciousness, from remembering the events preceding his rescue for some time to come; this temporary loss of memory being a very usual result from such an injury. Captain Trevanon, who came up every afternoon to the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

kitchen for the latest bulletin—since Tiny resolutely refused to let the doctor go home, except on business, until his services were no longer required, on the ground that there was more shaving-water and less temptation with her than elsewhere—treated this possibility as a personal insult. For, after all, the expected steamer had steered safely between Scarva Head and Tolstay Shoal in the small hours of the morning when the mist had lifted, and, after leaving its box of white bread, had gone away with the solitary passenger who had elected to wait for it. Nor had any wreckage drifted ashore to tell of any other disaster, so that the appearance of the Man from the Sea remained a mystery. Indeed, as time went on, people who had not heard that dull boom through the fog did not hesitate to say that the skipper had jumped to a conclusion overhastily. There had been no wreck at all. As for the man who lay up at the big house in the laird's bed, Captain Trevanon—being an outlander—might laugh, but there were such things as changelings—folk who crept into life through other folk's death.

So the skipper, naturally, grumbled over the unconscionable time which the stranger took in coming to himself.

## A HIATUS

“To himself!” echoed Tiny, with a contemptuous sniff. “An’ wha’ kens if he wants to? There’s mony wad be the better o’ a change. My certy, if Marion wad wake up some morn a new woman, the pots an’ pans wad hae a chance o’ bein’ clean.”

“But we want him to give an account——”

Tiny sniffed again. “He’s no in a fit state to gi’ an account o’ himsel’ in this warld or the next, an’ that’s the truth. Sae a’ we can do is to keep him frae the yane or the tither, jest happit in blankets like barm bread on the rise, till he’s made up his mind whaur he’s going, puir lammie!”

“And he will make it up in favour of this world,” said the doctor cheerfully; “he only wants——”

“A *hee-awtus*,” interrupted Tiny—“just a *hee-awtus*, as my first master, the auld professor o’ anatomy—wha kenned weel the mystery o’ a body’s inside—used to say when I asked what he wad hae next. ‘I’ll take a *hee-awtus*, Tiny,’ says he, ‘for my stomach’s sake. It will gi’e me time to remember a gude dish or forget a bad ain.’ Sae, just let him be; he’ll hae a better appetite for life when he turns till it again if we dinna grudge the puir lammie his *hee-awtus*.”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

The mistress of the house herself, however, scarcely knew whether to grudge it to him or not. In a way, it was a relief to come into that quiet sunny room, where no questions could be asked or answered, and as she sat beside the man who had, as it were, taken her husband's place, it comforted her to think that the latter might have left his past behind him as completely as this man had. So, during the first few days, she scarcely found it in her heart to grieve for the heroic death which had come to end such a very unheroic life. It had atoned for so much ; and now there was no fear for the future. She could keep Westray for him, she could hand it on to his son, and so, as it were, atone for all.

Not even the bills which, after the notice in the newspapers appeared, began to pour in on the executors of the late Ronald Macdonald shook her purpose. On the contrary, they strengthened her gratitude for that blameless end. For these trivial items, which by sheer numbers mounted up into round figures, had all been allowed for in the sums she had stinted herself to give for the London visits. If such things had not been paid, the money had gone elsewhere. Whither, she did not care to imagine ; it was sufficient that fear for the future was over



## A HIATUS

for ever. So, when her co-trustee, Evan Macdonald, her husband's only brother, who came down in hot haste on hearing the news, proposed to talk over business, she set the subject aside, saying there was nothing to settle. In truth, there seemed nothing to her, accustomed as she was to the management of everything. The bills had to be paid somehow, that was all. On the other hand, her brother-in-law, being kind-hearted in his way, thought she might as well be allowed a little breathing-time before facing the inevitable ; for even if his brother had not signed the deed of sale which the agent in London assured him had been sent down for signature, the sale must go on in any case. His brother had left no assets ; these bills must be paid ; and the right of sale was given to the trustees under the will. There was, therefore, no hurry ; it was more seemly, in fact, so to wait and see if there was to be a funeral before meddling with the dead man's papers. For Evan was great at social etiquette, as a man must needs be who, as a professional shot, has the run of his teeth in country-houses from August to February in return for his contributions to the game-bag. And one cannot visit for eight months of the year without coming across most incidents in life—

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

births and deaths, marriages and funerals, amongst their number.

So he let the question slide for the time, though, in truth, he was most anxious to have it settled, for he had literally no income except a small salary, which he took on the sly from a firm for cracking up their sporting wares in the smoking-rooms of his various hosts—and though he was not extravagant, he happened to be suffering from the lack of the solid cash necessary on occasions to give stability to paper. Now, if Westray were sold, he, under the breaking of entail, was entitled to a percentage on the sale. This was, briefly, why he had urged his brother to sell the island.

But when even Angus gave up seeking on the strand, Evan grew restive. He was due at Monte Carlo to shoot pigeons, and if he missed the next day's steamer, would have to wait another week uselessly. So he asked to see his sister-in-law, who, as a rule, sat upstairs, on business, and found her at the writing-table arranging papers.

"My dear Margaret," he began in solemn disapproval, "you might have allowed me——"

"Thanks," she replied coldly; "but there really was nothing to do—only these bills, which I am arranging to pay out of my own money."

## A HIATUS

“You mean to say,” he continued, aghast, “that you have looked through all Ronald’s papers——”

“And there was nothing—nothing at all,” she interrupted.

The ring of satisfaction in her tone made him retort sharply :

“Then there should have been ; for all I know, there may have been——”

“What ?”

He hesitated an instant, for he was a sportsman, not caring to wound his birds unnecessarily. If the deed was really not to be found, that part of the matter might as well be kept in the dark altogether. Then his irritation at the unseemliness of her action came uppermost.

“A deed of sale. Ronald had been in negotiation with Mr. Begbie for weeks. The deed was sent here for signature.”

“Sent here ?” she echoed dully.

“Yes, sent here ; and if, as you say, it is not among his papers, he must have had it in his pocket when he was drowned.”

“In his pocket ?” she echoed again ; then, as if that thought drove all others away, she started to her feet and faced Evan threateningly. “It is not true,” she cried ; “wherever it may be, it

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

is not there. And as for the rest"—she paused, seeking blindly for some refuge—"I do not believe it, either. I deny it altogether. Ronald always wanted to sell, of course ; we talked it over that very last day ; but I do not believe——"

"You can see the agent's letter, if you like, my dear Margaret," said her brother-in-law, with a shrug of his shoulders ; "but the deed certainly came here ; so I am afraid that I must ask you to let me look through the drawers again."

The blood flew to Margaret's face. "You—you do not trust," she began.

"My dear girl," said her brother-in-law peevishly, "it isn't a question of trust, unless you wish to make it so ; though, of course, with your views, it is unfortunate you should have taken upon yourself to look over Ronald's papers in my absence. It makes you liable to misapprehension. It is a question of fact, and we had better set that at rest without delay. Have you the keys ?"

She looked at him for an instant, as if she meant to refuse, then suddenly, without a word, turned back to the table, laid a bunch of keys upon it, and left the room.

Once in her room, however, she walked up and down in a sort of despair, clinching her hands

## A HIATUS

on her forehead, as if to force control on the wild whirl of her brain. It could not, it must not, be true ! It was not possible that the deed of sale should have been in her husband's pocket, even in the house, during that last conversation with him, which she had striven to keep tender in her memory—which she had, as it were, toned down for the sake of the dead. And then in an instant she stood appalled before the only choice Fate had left her—to think of her dead drifting on to the Day of Reckoning with that proof of his dishonour, of his treachery towards her, upon him ; or to think of the deed, signed, maybe, concealed somewhere still in the house. Not in the writing-table, however. Of that she was sure. Evan might pry there to his heart's content. But it might be elsewhere. And if she found it, what would she do with it ? With the question still unanswered, she passed swiftly into her husband's dressing-room, and, opening the drawers, began to ransack them feverishly, searching in every pocket of the clothes which the dead man would never wear again.

Half an hour afterwards, Tiny, coming in to say that Mr. Macdonald would be glad to speak to her if she could spare him time, found her staring

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

out at the darkening Atlantic idly, and exclaimed at her white face :

“Lordsake’s, ma’am !” she cried ; “ye look as if ye had seen a ghaist.”

And so perhaps she had—the ghost of a dead man, whose feet were set towards the Judgment-seat.

“It is not among these papers, certainly,” began her brother-in-law rather apologetically as she re-entered the room ; “and I am willing to take your word for it.”

“That is unwise,” she interrupted steadily, “for I warn you that if I come across it I shall treat it as a piece of waste paper.”

“My dear——” he began, in horrified amazement ; then he stopped with an embarrassed cough, feeling that he had literally nothing to say to such an outrageous assertion. “However,” he added, in tones of positive relief, “I do not expect it is to be found. My brother, in all probability, had it with him in his pocket.”

“I refuse to believe that, either,” she said. “He may have burnt it, as it deserved to be burnt—as I would burn it if I came across it now.”

Evan gave another embarrassed cough.

“Then I hope you won’t—not that it would

## A HIATUS

really alter the situation much, my dear girl, as even you will allow on reflection, for we shall have to sell Westray in order to pay these bills. They run into four figures already, and there may be more."

Margaret walked over to the writing-table again, took up the keys which her brother-in-law had left there, and slipped them into her pocket. Then she turned to her co-trustee.

"I have no intention of giving my consent to the sale, and you cannot sell without it. As for the deed you speak of, I suppose I must believe in it. But I prefer to believe, since it is not to be found, that my husband burnt it. For the rest, I will pay these bills out of my brother's money. He left it to me in trust for my children, so as to keep it out of your brother's power to spend it ; and I suppose you will say I have really no right to use it for this purpose. Well, I take the responsibility of that on my own shoulders. My son can sue me for breach of trust when he comes of age, if he likes."

Evan Macdonald was silent for a moment. Despite his shocked amazement at her reckless defiance, he was conscious of admiring her pluck, just as he admired the gameness of a stag at bay.

"And you take the responsibility of keeping



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Westray on your own shoulders, too, I hope," he said at last. "It is rather a big one, mind you, what with this agitation about the land question. I don't think even you can deny that in these days a rich man makes a better landlord than a poor one. Now, Begbie wants little Westray as a political speculation. He is going to stand at the next election, and it will serve him in good stead. He has the big island for grouse and deer, so he can afford this one for the crofters. He could do much more for them than you can, and they know it."

"I take the responsibility of that also," said Margaret hotly. "We in the Highlands want no rich Englishmen to pauperize our tenants. They have all that they have a right to—all their fathers had. I cannot give them money, it is true, but I can take next to nothing from them. Ronald and I will only ask to live on the soil as they do; and we have the right to that—surely we have the right to that?"

"My dear girl," replied Evan peevishly, "if you lived in the world as I do, you would know that no one who is poor has a right to own land at all. However, there is no use fussing over the matter. I am helpless without you, and, as you are the boy's guardian, you can do as you like

## A HIATUS

with him ; though I must own that if I had a delicate child like he is——”

“ I take the responsibility of that also,” she interrupted, almost fiercely. But after her brother-in-law had left the room, saying that in that case he had better pack up his things, she stood irresolute before the piles of papers on the table, and finally wandered off to stand instead by the bed where the Man from the Sea still lay unconscious.

“ He’s having a fine *hee-awtus*,” said Tiny, coming to stand by the bed also, “ an’ I’m free to confess I’m as bad’s the skipper wi’ wonder as to what kind o’ a soul is waitin’ to come back into that bonny corp. But, thank the Lord ! we’re no’ responsible for that, as we might be if he was a new-born babe.”

## CHAPTER VI

### A WALLED GARDEN

“TEM’ME about it again, pleasth, Mистер Magnuth,” said little Ronald coaxingly to the Man from the Sea. His hiatus had ended two months before, but he was still at Westray House, partly because of the crushed ankle which Dr. Gilchrist said might lame him for life if he did not lay up, mostly because the doctor had been right in foretelling a temporary loss of memory. It was coming back to him every day now, but at first he had been able to remember nothing about himself save that his name was Magnus. Even now memory was curiously impersonal. He could remember, for instance, things that had happened, but his part in them was blotted out. He remembered books that he had read, without remembering how he had come to read them, and sometimes he would look up from a newspaper and say :

“I know that man’s name ; I’m sure I know

## A WALLED GARDEN

the man himself. I could tell you a lot about him, but I can't for the life of me say how I came to know him."

He had, briefly, lost himself. His *ego*, he said, had taken a holiday. He was a man without a past, absolutely and entirely irresponsible for anything—an experience, he said lightly, too pleasant to be shortened unnecessarily; so, since Fate had been kind enough to provide him with a small bag of sovereigns in his trousers pocket, he would take the liberty of handing them over to Mrs. Macdonald for his use and benefit, and stay where he was, if she would be so kind as to allow him.

Thus these two—the man who disclaimed any responsibility at all, and the woman who usurped one over her whole world—sate in the garden of Westray House. Her black dress was the only shade in the treeless, shadeless, almost leafless garden, bounded squarely by the high, bare, grey old house and a high, bare, grey old wall. Strangers to the Hebrides, feeling the sunny, scented warmth of that sheltered square, where the odd little paths of sand forced a half-seen way through a wilderness of bright blossom, and hearing the low whisper of the summer sea on the sands without, said it was a pity to block the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

view, and called the wall purposeless. It gave the whole place, they complained, the air of a prison or an asylum. And so, in truth, it was—an asylum for flowers from the wind—that wild, soft, western wind which scarcely strikes chill at first, but which freezes the very marrow in a strong man's bones in half an hour ; which denies a single tree to the outer islands, and keeps every plant that grows in them to the strict business of blossoming. They kept to it bravely in Westray garden, anyhow, so that the black dress showed like an inkspot on a mosaic, and Magnus, having an eye for colour—indeed, if one might judge by a certain excess of vitality in his face, a somewhat florid one—wished he could change it for a robe of cloth of gold. It would have suited the garden so much better, and the hair, too—for the matter of that, the wearer also, widow though she was. For he had learnt enough from Tiny and Dr. Gilchrist during the last two months to doubt whether he had done Margaret any great harm in taking the laird's place in life. That, he told himself, was the solid sense in the matter ; but Magnus could not confine himself to sense, so his voice always softened when he spoke to the woman who, in a way, he had widowed. It was a very soft voice at all

## A WALLED GARDEN

times, however—one of those voices which are a gift to the possessor, enabling them, as it were, to juggle with words—and it seemed to hit the keynote of the sunny garden as he answered the little laird's request by a question :

“About what again ? Do you mean about Balder the Beautiful ?”

Ronald shook his head as he stood with reckless little feet among the flowers.

“About a snakey horrid cave, an' bluggy hearts, an' a red-dot 'tones a-'ticking close to their pore handies,” he said complacently.

“My dear Ronald !” exclaimed Margaret, who sate working close by. “Really, Mr. Magnus, you should not tell the child such things.”

“My dear lady,” he said lightly, “I can assure you that my selections from the Eddas are catholic in the extreme. I tell Ronald of Gimle as well as of Nastrund. I even, out of deference to his infant mind, refrain from mentioning my present abode, Ginungagep—the vasty deep in which there is room to turn round without having to apologize to angels or devils for getting between the wind and their nobility. Is it my fault if he prefers the ‘Strand of Corpses’ to ‘Halls Brighter than the Sun’ ? Is it his fault, either, that, being a boy, he loves to sup on

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

horrors ? I did when I was his age. I remember——” He paused and laughed.

Margaret frowned. He had been a little over-reticent of his memories of late to please her.

“ You forget, anyhow,” she said coldly, “ that you must always have been very different from my poor Ronald. You must always have been so—so full of life—so—so gay—so—so young.”

“ Tem’me it all over again, Misther Magnus, pleasth,” pleaded the child, making his hearer stoop suddenly to catch the frail little figure in his arms, swing it to his knees, and lie back, cuddling it close in his arms. Seen so, almost touching each other, the two faces looked much of an age ; for Ronald’s had a gravity beyond his years, and the youthfulness which had been Margaret’s first impression of the Man from the Sea had remained ever since, startling her after-knowledge—which had come with his recollections—that he must be at least her own age.

“ I am young still,” he said defiantly, “ and so are you ; so are we all in this garden. And everybody likes best those things of which they have and can have least. I always envy my neighbour’s ox and ass on principle, because I’m not likely ever to have one of my own ; and as for his wife, I never had that either, but——” He



## A WALLED GARDEN

shot a queer glance at Margaret's disapproving face, and turned to the child. "Now, Ronald, if you lie still and shut your eyes tight—you will see it better so—I'll tell you a story. Let me see, what shall it be about? Something that will please you, and not shock your mother?"

"I shall be going away directly," she said quickly; "I have letters to write, and the women are coming with their webs of cloth this afternoon. I must take them as usual, of course." She sighed as she stitched away a little faster, and Magnus raised his eyebrows impatiently.

"I know, Ronald," he said, with a sudden smile; "it shall be about a beautiful princess in an enchanted garden——"

"Don't 'ike gardings," dissented the child, in injured tones. "'Tem'me about a red-dot 'tones a-'ticking to their handies."

"But the princess shall stick pins into her heart—great big hairpins, and—and other pins. That will be lovely, won't it? Now, lie still, and let me think how to begin."

Margaret looked up as if undecided to go or stay, for the stories which Magnus told when he was in the humour for them had a knack of wasting her time; but before she had made her decision his voice began, seeming to hit the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

cadence of the unseen sea and the whizzing hum of the unseen bees among the flowers with a rhythm that grew—after the manner of the true *improvisatore*—with each word.

“ There was a maid of Eld, with hair red-gold as the sun and eyes blue-green as the sea. Her skirt was leaves and flowers, her bodice flowers and leaves. She sat so still in the sun that she heard her own heart beat. ‘ Why do you beat ? ’ she said ; but it beat and beat and beat. ‘ Fie ! it is wrong to beat ; ’ but it beat and beat and beat.

“ Then she kissed her heart, and said, ‘ Don’t beat, dear Heart, don’t beat ! ’ ”——

Margaret’s hands fell idly in her lap ; she lay back in her chair and listened.

“ —But her heart beat answer back, ‘ I’m all in the dark, dear Soul ! Hang me in wind and sun, and I’ll try to be still, dear Soul.’ So she tore it out of her breast, and hung it in wind and sun ; but still it could not rest : it went beating on and on. ‘ ’Tis only the wind,’ it pled ; ‘ I’m still as a heart that’s dead.’ ‘ You shall see for yourself,’ she said. So she set her mirror there, and her heart hung still as the dead, till she came to comb her hair. Then it beat as a heart new wed, to find her face so fair. So she

## A WALLED GARDEN

took the gowden pin that pinned her gowden hair. ‘Tak’ that, ye Heart o’ Sin ; I trow ye’ll beat nae mair.’ ”

Ronald gave a little sigh of satisfaction. “ Did it hurt awful, Musther Magnuth, and bleege ? ”

“ Awful.”

“ Tem’me some more, please.”

“ But her gowden hair fell down—fell down to kiss her feet. And her bleedin’ heart beat fast to see a sight sae sweet. So she took the pin o’ pearl that clipped her bodice gay. ‘Tak’ that, false Heart, to end your whirl. Ye’ll beat nae mair to-day.’ But her neck o’ pearl showed soft below her——”

“ Is it in the gyarden ? ” said a new voice. “ Then it is not troubling you any more, Tiny, I will be.”

Magnus muttered something under his breath. Margaret, with a half-impatient “ It must be Mary Macinver,” rose to meet her visitor.

“ Never mind, Ronald,” said Magnus in an undertone to the protesting child, “ we’ll stick more pins into that heart yet ; but I’ll back the heart to beat till doomsday, for all that.”

“ I’d ’top it beatin’,” boasted the child in childish fashion.

The man gave a short laugh as he swung the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

little fellow to foothold among the flowers again. "You might," he assented half to himself; "the maternal instinct is strong even in hearts."

"And are you getting better, Mr. Magnus?" inquired Mary Macinver, her pleasant voice singing up and down the scale in the most tuneful of Highland drawls, like the cooing of a dove. "I was hearing all about you from Dr. Gilchrist; and Captain Trevanon was telling me, too, that you were bad; but Tiny was saying just now you were much stronger."

This habit of giving chapter and verse was not a claim to credence, but a challenge to contradiction; it was one which Mhairi, the minister's daughter, found very useful in her father's straggling parish, where, by dint of distance, gossip went far without fear of detection, unless put to the name-test in this fashion. For the rest she was a frank-faced, pretty girl, with hazel eyes rather wide apart, and a general air of good sense and good temper positively radiating from the crown of her tweed-becapped head to the sole of her stout-booted feet.

"I am very well indeed, Miss Macinver," replied Magnus elaborately—"so well that Mrs. Macdonald is going to turn me out of the garden soon for fear I should eat apples."

## A WALLED GARDEN

"I am not going to do anything of the kind, Mhairi," protested Margaret. "And you had better stay where you are, and not try to make yourself worse by walking alone, Mr. Magnus. Mhairi and I have no secrets—have we, dear?"

"Not many, whatever," assented Mhairi placidly, as Magnus settled himself down with an air of resignation. "And that is why I am coming to tell you that Mr. Macleod will be returning from Australia sooner than I was expecting——"

"My dear child, how exciting! That means, of course, that you are to be married——"

"Sooner than I was expecting," assented the bride-elect calmly. "But it is not so sudden as you may think, for it is a month back that I heard. Only I was not telling you, of course, dear Mrs. Macdonald. But Peter Macfie, the merchant, was saying you had told the women to bring their webs again, so I thought you would not mind."

Margaret flushed faintly. It was over-soon, she knew, according to island etiquette, for her even to be sitting in the garden among the flowers, and she glanced over to Magnus as if he were in some way to blame.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“I must have the tweed ready for the English visitors to buy,” she said quickly. “With Communion week coming on, the women will like to have some money in hand. There is no reason they should suffer.”

“That is very good of you, whatever,” assented Mhairi. “So I was thinking to tell you before they came that old Kirsty’s web is Peter’s by rights for bread and tea; so, if you were not to be taking hers, it will be better——”

“I shall certainly take it,” broke in Margaret hotly; “but if Peter sends me in a proper bill, I will pay him out of the price. I’m determined to stop him charging three-and-six a pound for bad tea and only allowing two shillings a yard for the tweed—the long Scotch yard, too. It is wicked. I shall get tea myself and sell it to the poor old wives reasonably.”

Mhairi smiled, showing her even white teeth.

“It is the same all over the islands,” she said comfortably; “so Peter will not be thanking you, nor the people either.”

“Then you are no believer in Celtic gratitude?” said Magnus, waking up, as it were, from his silence. “I am sorry, for I happen to be a Celt myself.”

## A WALLED GARDEN

Margaret started and looked at him sharply ; but Mhairi took the information calmly.

“ So am I, whatever, and we are grateful, surely, for what we like ; but we are not caring much for new things. Why it was going, as I came here, I did, to tell the Scarva cotters that Mr. Macleod was willing to pay their way to New Westray when he returns, but they were none of them listening at all.”

“ Would he really take them ?” asked Margaret.

“ Surely—any that is willing to come ; but it is tailors and suchlike Mr. Macleod is wanting most.”

Magnus, who had been drumming his supple fingers on the arm of his chair, burst into a laugh with the air of one escaping from an importunate thought.

“ Is there room for a bard in your new cosmogony, Miss Macinver ?” he asked, “ or I could do odd jobs in the preaching line.”

Mhairi laughed in return—the good-natured laugh which is so utterly devoid of humour.

“ My father is to be minister, and we have a piper,” she began, when Margaret, after her wont when a subject had any bearing on Westray, went on in deadly earnest :



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“But if he would really take them, it would be worth while braving the odium of eviction and forcing them to a better life in a new land, where——”

“The remedy is simpler than that, surely,” interrupted Magnus suddenly, in a strange, new voice, which made Margaret start and turn to him half in alarm. “Why should not these men have their own share of their own land? Why should they be driven out among strangers, far from their fathers’ homes, their fathers’ graves——” He paused as suddenly, and gave an odd laugh.

“And are you a Land Leaguer, Mr. Magnus?” asked Mhairi composedly, as she helped Tiny, who had come out with the tea-tray. “It is making a great fuss they are lately, Mrs. Macdonald, in the island. But it is sending paid agitators I hear they are in other places, so we are better off here. But, indeed, Mr. Magnus, that would not be possible in Little Westray, because of the cottars and squatters. Mr. Macleod says it is a poor gift to give any man less than twenty acres of this land besides the *sooming* for his cows, and there will not be that amount in the island.”

Magnus rose hastily. “And Mr. Macleod must be right, of course. I think, Mrs. Macdonald,

## A WALLED GARDEN

I will get Tiny to convoy me in. Dr. Gilchrist said he could see me on his way to the big island if I wanted him——”

“Your ankle is not hurting?” began Margaret anxiously. “Did I bandage it too tight?”

“You did everything absolutely entirely right, as you always do,” he interrupted impatiently, “and I only want to see Gilchrist to ask him when I can begin rational life again.”

Margaret looked after him with a sudden pang at her heart.

“I shall miss him when he goes,” she said, after a pause. “It has made the time pass easier having him here. I was only thinking to-day how different he was from me.”

“From you?” echoed Mhairi sharply. “He might well be that. But he is not like anybody at all that I have known, and he might be anybody.”

The object of this scathing remark was at that moment confiding to Tiny that he was going to pack his portmanteau. It was time he left off consorting with such excellent people as Miss Macinver; for supposing, he remembered suddenly, that he was a burglar, what would she say to him?

Tiny eyed him with grave comprehension. “Hoots!” she said, “ye’re just suffering a lapse

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

o' grace in the shape o' a memory, as is only tae be expectit ; for we are nane o' us perfect—cooks abune a', for it's hard, I tell ye, tae keep a clear conscience what wi' quennells that s'ou'd hae a laxity aboot them and go backslidin' ower the tongue, an' jellies that s'ou'd stand up firm as the righteous under affliction. But ye hae company onyhow the day, for I ha'e lockit Gilchrist up in the spare bedroom till I can get leesure for shavin'-water, since the company were cryin' on their tea, and there's nae doing twa things at a time wi' a peat-fire an' that witch-o'-Endor o' a woman, Marion, that has ae a caldron o' dog's parritch up the lum. So the doctor, puir lammie ! had to curb his desire for regeneration ; for he kens fine now, Mr. Magnus, when he has wandered, what wi' me lookin' to him as a cat to a mousie while ye lay sick. 'Tiny,' he says, when he cam' ben a while syne, 'will I do ?' 'Doctor,' says I, 'gin it were the first o' August an' the keeper no' in wi' the bag till the dressing-bell'd gane, I'd no' send up a flapper duckling to table wi' sic a stubble o' hairs to him. And wi' the strand afore ye, whaur yane boulder o' a landmark's like anither in glory, it's a clear temptin' o' Providence to be in sic a maze aboot yer heed.' So he gaed awa' like a mousie. Ay !

## A WALLED GARDEN

he's learnin' fine, an' he was up a' nicht wi' a pauper body in Tolstay, an' hasna had a bite decent food since, for his cook's but a wastrel-o'-an-islander, like Marion. Sae, what could anybody expec' ?"

"Tiny," said Magnus, giving her brawny arm a deliberate squeeze, "when I've quite gone to the deuce, I will come back and ask you to marry me. You are born to have a bad husband."

"Hoot awa' wi' ye," replied Tiny, hugely delighted. "If that's sae, ye hav'na a chance o' the place, an' must put up wi' someone that's born to hae a gude yane. And that's no' far to seek," she added, half to herself.

"Too low for heaven and too high for hell," he said cheerfully. "I must hurry up and get in a good consignment of virtue or vice, or I shall fall between two stools."

Two hours afterwards Margaret, coming in from a weary struggle with webs of tweed and bills for tea, which, as Mhairi Macinver had foretold, resulted in general dissatisfaction, found Magnus with Ronald in his arms.

"How good you are to the child !" she said, telling herself that Ronald would miss him, too, when he went, would lose a companion in this man, who seemed to her as irresponsible as a

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

child himself, and as such had somehow lightened the burden of life for her strangely.

“We have been sticking more pins into that heart, haven’t we, Ronald?” he said coolly.

“An’ it beat an’ beat an’ beat,” murmured the boy sleepily. “Tem’me some more, pleasth.”

Magnus laughed. “And so they lived happily ever after. That is always the end of the story, or should be. Now you must go to your mother, for I have some letters to write.”

Margaret turned to him again sharply. “Then you remember——”

“Yes,” he said, “I begin to see myself in a glass darkly, and I’m not sure if I like my personal appearance. Why shouldn’t a man play the Pharisee to his own infirmities, and pass by on the other side?”

## CHAPTER VII

### ROUND THE PEAT-STACK

THOSE three months which had passed so uneventfully since the laird had disappeared down the cliffs, and which had brought Margaret a certain still content with the new conditions of her life, had passed as monotonously for the rest of West-ray, but had left it more vaguely dissatisfied. To begin with, the winter had been a stormless one, and not only on Angus Mohr's wretched fields was there a scant supply of the seaweed necessary to make the poor land yield a harvest, for that, also, was the gift of the gods from the sea. Then the beasts on the bleak moorland were thin, owing to a dry spell the previous autumn, which had checked the fodder-growth. A drover or two had already come spying round for the annual market in July, and had declared that prices would be down two or three pounds. So the outlook for the future was poor indeed. And then, inevitably, the fact that the laird had been on the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

point of selling the little island to the very man whose riches had made such a difference to the big island had leaked out vaguely. If he had only lived a little longer, men said to each other regretfully, they, too, might have hoped to share in the shower of gold. And now the widow refused to carry out her dead husband's wish, though his brother—who, after all, had a right to speak, since the young laird was but a delicate child—was willing to sell. It was a pity.

They said no more than that at first, since the extreme nearness to actual sale was only known to those immediately concerned in it, and the old clannish feeling lingered, though, naturally, it could not but be weakened by that example, close at hand, of the advantages of newer, richer blood. Mistress Macdonald meant well, of course, and the lairdie, wee though he was, might yet grow to be as fine a Macdonald as any ; but was it quite the thing for her to start selling tea and sugar to the old wives ? And young Begbie over at the Lodge was as fine a shot as any Highlander, though his father, honest man, was better at putting a five-pound note into his breeches pocket than a bullet into a royal. Ay ! and pulling it out again, for the ghillies always got a pound apiece for a good head. And then, they heard



## ROUND THE PEAT-STACK

tell, Mistress Macdonald was for dealing with tailors and suchlike in the tweeds, instead of just selling an andering happening web to a sportsman, or joining an association with Her Grace of this or that, or even a royal Princess as patroness. In short, that dread of the unconventional, that cult of the genteel which is to be found strongest in regard to others amongst those who cannot show it in their own lives, made them shake their heads over the fact that there were but two servants, all told, at Westray House, and that Margaret might be seen any day of the week tending the dairy or weeding the garden like a common man or woman.

Then, as the warmer weather came on after a mild winter, relapsing fever, born of sheer lack of cleanliness, air and light, broke out in the Scarva croft, and Dr. Gilchrist did not hesitate to tell the truth—namely, that the houses were not fit for human habitation, the water-supply hopelessly contaminated, all the conditions of life insanitary; though he did not hesitate also to qualify the fact by saying that he did not see how these things were to be remedied, unless the district board were prepared to spend a lot of money.

“The people themselves won’t stir hand or

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

foot, and they can't, of course, do more than give free labour. And Mrs. Macdonald can't. To begin with, she hasn't had a penny of rent for ten years, and then half the houses were built without consent of the proprietor. The people are all squatters, and she could turn them out at a day's notice; the writ of eviction has been pending for two years."

"That has nothing to do with it," replied the bank agent hotly. "It is your duty to report on them to the board, and we will serve the proprietor with notice to rebuild."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"And she, of course, will evict in that case—and quite right, too."

"There will be trouble if she does, for all that," put in the Free Church minister, who was new to the place; but the bank agent smiled.

"And if there was it wouldn't matter. We rather want a few cases of high-handed tyranny to go to the country with next spring."

"High-handed fiddlesticks!" said the doctor angrily, as he put the last bottle of his travelling store into its place. "As a matter of fact, the Scarva folk ought to be turned out neck and crop. They would do far better elsewhere."

They could scarcely do worse, he told himself,

## ROUND THE PEAT-STACK

as he went in to Angus Mohr's house, where a wee baby lay dead on the peat-smoked kist doing duty as a dresser; the mother, barely convalescent, was nursing another invalid, and Ishbel, who might have helped her, lay in a sort of box full of straw and rags, dignified by the name of a bed. Angus Mohr himself, loose and listless, lounged after the manner of his kind to leeward of the peat-stack outside; yet his heart was devoured by anxiety, his soul torn with grief—it was only that to his ignorance there was nothing to be *done*.

“Do you think Ishbel will die?” he asked suddenly of the doctor, as, on coming out again, the latter paused for a word or two of comfort.

“She is very ill,” replied Dr. Gilchrist, “but she is young and strong. If she could be got to take more interest in getting well she would do, but there appears to be something on her mind. Can you guess at anything?”

Angus Mohr shook his head sullenly. If he did, he was not going to tell. No, by Heaven! no one should know. And yet, if Ishbel were to die, and anything were to turn up afterwards, he, Angus, would get the blame. Besides, it was awful to think of her going down to judgment with a sin like that on her soul. It had not

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

mattered so much when she was alive and strong. There were plenty of thieves in this world who fared as well as their neighbours, but in the next it was different. Hitherto he had been content to hold aloof from her, as she had held aloof from him, because of her dirty conscience. It was an ill companion, certainly, for a sick-bed ; and for a dying one, horrible. Angus, like most of his race, had very definite ideas of hell-fire, and he was fond of Ishbel, all the more, in a way, for being a wild lass, since he was wild himself.

Yes ! he would speak to her some time—before she died.

He gave an exclamation as someone, coming round the peat-stack, laid a burning hand on his. It was Ishbel herself, clinging unsteadily to the stack for support, looking more dead than alive, despite the fever flush in her cheeks, the fever fire in her eyes.

“ Angus ! ” she panted, “ it’s killing me ; I saw it in the doctor’s eyes. For God’s sake give it me, and I can tell the mistress I forgot, or we can say we found it on the strand. Angus ! the wrath of God is on the house. Don’t you see it ? It is on me. I never was ill before, and I was quite well till I made up my mind to say nothing—to let you keep it—to let you be a

## ROUND THE PEAT-STACK

thief. Angus ! give it me—give it me ! or I must die.”

She was clinging to him with both hands now ; he had to put his arm round her to prevent her falling. She burnt all over to his touch, and he shivered, thinking again of that hell-fire.

“ Give you what ? ” he asked hoarsely, wondering what she would be at.

“ Oh, don’t pretend not to know, when there’s no time to lose. The laird’s coat, Angus—the laird’s coat, with his watch and chain in it.”

Angus recoiled in sheer dismay. To begin with, she spoke too loud for safety, with Red Dugald’s peat-stack alongside his ; and then the accusation was too barefaced.

“ I haven’t got it,” he whispered fiercely ; “ you know that better than I——”

“ Don’t lie to me,” she pleaded wildly. “ It is life or death to have the curse removed. He gave it you, Angus—I saw him. Angus, don’t let me die.”

There was someone coming out of Red Dugald’s hut for peats ; he could see that. And he could see also something in his sister’s face which convinced him that she believed him the thief ; and, if so, where, in Heaven’s name, was the laird’s coat ? There was no time, however,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

to think of anything save to quiet the poor distraught creature before anyone came to hear—to quiet her for her own sake also, and get her back to her bed again ; for with his conviction of some mistake had come back a sudden rush of remorseful affection.

“ I haven’t got it, darling,” he said, using the Gaelic endearment. “ Why should I ? Didn’t I give it to the mistress myself that night ? ”

Ishbel looked at him, swaying weakly. “ You gave it ! Angus, swear that you gave it. Ah, Angus ! I don’t want to burn—I don’t want to burn.”

“ If she hasn’t got it, I swear by God Almighty I don’t know where it is—God strike me dead if I do ! ”

Ishbel gave a little cry and fell into his arms in a dead faint, just as Red Dugald’s mother came up to the stack. Between them they carried Ishbel back to bed, where, after a time, unconsciousness passed into sleep.

“ She is much better,” said Dr. Gilchrist next day when he called ; “ and, if she hasn’t a relapse, will do well. So take care, and don’t excite her in any way, or disturb her unnecessarily.”

Big Angus, lounging as usual behind the peat-stack, but with a face which showed the lighten-

## ROUND THE PEAT-STACK

ing of his heart, swore that he would do his best. And why should he disturb her ? he asked himself. It was true that if Mistress Macdonald had not the coat, he did not know where it was. Besides, what harm could it do, that she should be thought to have it, since it was her own by rights ?



## CHAPTER VIII

### TORQUIL'S DUNE

MAGNUS, the Man from the Sea, lay on his back in the patch of turf surrounded by a double circle of crumbling dry stone walls, which was still called Torquil's Dune. There were many such lake dwellings to be found in Westray, all, like this one, standing on a tiny islet scarcely bigger than the ruins, in the centre of a shallow loch. The only approach to them was by boat or the long causeways of flat stepping-stones which still rose from the shiny levels of the water.

That at Torquil's Dune was almost perfect, and Magnus, as he lay looking through the gap which had once been a doorway, could see the connecting, yet disconnected, links of stone losing themselves in the glisten, and that, again, merge into a low, heather-set shore. And as he looked, he thought of the legend of Torquil's Dune, which he had just been telling Ronald, who now lay asleep in the shadow on a bed improvised from

## TORQUIL'S DUNE

some bracken and a coat ; for Margaret was later than usual in coming from the house, which lay but a quarter of a mile away, to take the child home for his noonday rest. It was a very simple story. Torquil had shed blood, and had been happy for twenty years. And then, one day in harvest-time, the dead man's son, come to his manhood, had appeared over the horizon to make Torquil drop his sickle and run with the hare's foot for his dune. But the avenger of blood had the deer's foot. So the very last stone of the causeway was still red with Torquil's blood. Ronald had clapped his hands over the tale, but Magnus lay thinking of it with a certain irritation. That sort of thing was so unnecessary. Why, for instance, should he himself cry "Adsum," like a good little boy, to the mysterious voice which had called him by name some ten days ago ? It was sheer tyranny of Fate to give him *carte blanche* in a new rôle, which he was enjoying immensely, and then summon him back to the old one without a word of warning. Through the mouth of that excellent young person, Miss Macinver, too ! That was an aggravation of the insult. Magnus, whimsical by nature, hated coercion of all kinds. It had been impossible for him to dismiss memory, but he

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

had done what he could to make it ineffectual. He had, briefly, made the letters which he had written in the first flush of remembrance into pipe-lights. There was no hurry, he told himself. He had money left to go on with, and one of the advantages of being a rolling stone was that no one was anxious about you. *Du reste*, Westray was an experience in itself which might be useful—he smiled suddenly, for Margaret's tall black figure poised as it were upon the water, the sunlight full upon her glorious hair, made him confess that utilitarian motives had little to do with his dislike to end a pleasant companionship. And why should it end? Why should he even tell her things about himself which might make her less friendly?

He sate up as she came near, pointing to the child.

“Don't disturb him,” he said appealingly; “he is really quite warm, and it is so jolly out here.”

She glanced at his white shirt-sleeves doubtfully, yet with an odd little thrill of pleasure, not only for his care of the child, but for the look of him, for his brightness, his insouciance, his very daintiness and freshness.

“You will be cold,” she began.

## TORQUIL'S DUNE

"My dear lady," he interrupted, "if you will condescend to my level, I'll promise you shelter from all the storms of Westray—though I suppose you call it a flat calm to-day! It really is quite windless here, and shirt-sleeves are more comfortable underwear, as the advertisements say, than the sackcloth and ashes in which—to judge by experience—you have been sitting all the morning. Why should you? Westray isn't worth it."

"You don't understand Westray," she replied impatiently, though, following his hint, she seated herself in the shelter also.

"Don't I?" he echoed; "but I shall in time, for—I am not going to trespass on your kindness any longer, of course, so don't be horrified—I have decided on stopping in the island for a few weeks. I mean to study it—write a book about it, perhaps."

Margaret stared at him, then frowned, both surprise and vexation being due partly to her own unforeseen feeling of relief.

"But your friends," she began; "you wrote——"

"I have heard nothing from my friends to prevent my staying," he interrupted coolly. "The fact is, Mrs. Macdonald, I really haven't

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

any friends who have a right to dictate what I shall do and shan't do—at least, I can't remember any. If I were to choose to remain here all my life, there is no one to say me nay, except you ; and has the Man from the Sea been so intolerable that you cannot away with him for a month longer, especially when he is a mile or more from you at the inn ?”

That beautiful voice of his was full of the tenderest banter, and she flushed up quickly. “ You know it is not that,” she said, almost defiantly. “ You have been very kind. I was going to thank you before you left. I do so now. You have helped me——”

He shook his head. “ You haven't let me. But I could. I can add two and two together as well as most folk, though I prefer to make five of them instead of four. And I can punch Peter Macfie's head.”

Margaret, smiling despite that fact that Peter's contumacy in regard to her benevolent schemes was no jesting matter to her serious outlook, paused before she replied. She was thinking that Magnus said sooth. He did put something new into the dull all-fours equation of life—something brought her a strange sense of relaxation.

“ It won't come to blows,” she said quite gaily.

## TORQUIL'S DUNE

"Of course, he is in a vile temper about my shop, as he calls it; but he can't do me any harm."

"Can't he? Haven't you even one pane of glass in your palace of dreams? What a dull place it must be, deprived of all the light of Heaven! But we won't argue about that. It is too fine a day. Besides, when Peter does need punching, I claim the right of cousinship. Ronald and I were making out the family tree when he fell asleep in the collateral branches. But it is quite clear. Your maiden name was Harver. So Harver, Harfar, Haarfagar. There we are at Harold, which accounts for the hair"—he gave her a look *en passant*—"then I seem to remember that I am a lineal descendant of Magnus, the law-betterer, who, in the year 1256, gave back the Hebrides to their rightful owners, which accounts——" He paused abruptly.

"For what?" she asked, plaiting idly at a fern-frond she had picked. These idle tales of his always found a response in some hitherto unknown part of herself, and the very surprise that it should be so was bewildering.

"For my advising you to give it up now, and for my knowledge of the crofter question, which

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

confounds Miss Macinver," he replied coolly. "My forbears were the Birch-legs, the nationalists of Norway. But that is another story. The point is that my greatest grandmamma was Queen Margaret, who, as the historians say, 'held the crown in trust for her infant son, and ruled her people for their good with a rod of iron.' " He had been watching Margaret's face keenly, and now, with a swift gesture, held out his hand. "Cousins or no, let us be friends, at least, Mrs. Macdonald; here in this old dune where, for all we know, some of our ancestors may have lived and been friends, and found shelter in the past."

"In the past!" she echoed a little unsteadily, for that warm clasp of his—which she met instinctively—was still more bewildering in its effect. "You are not fond of talking about the past as a rule."

"I'll talk about it now," he said joyously.

And he did. Tiny, coming out nearly an hour later with the dinner-bell, paused half-way across the causeway to smile broadly.

"'Man shall not live by bread alone,'" she murmured. "An' a stoved hen an' a steam pudden will no come to muckle hairm; no sae much as her hairt, puir lammie! set in a fiery



## TORQUIL'S DUNE

furnace o' treebulation, wi' none to gie it a baste o' oil an' wine."

But her kindly intention was marred by instability in the stepping-stone, which, as she turned, forced her to fling out her arms in order to avoid overbalancing, so that the dinner-bell roused even Ronald from his sleep.

Margaret sprang to her feet, with cheeks as flushed as the child's.

"Dinner! and I have forgotten—oh, such heaps of things I ought to have done!"

"And I have forgotten such heaps of things I ought to have done, so we are quits. Don't bother about the newspaper, Mrs. Macdonald; I've read it," he added hastily.

But Margaret's housewifely fingers were already folding up the paper which Magnus had spread under the child's bed of bracken. It would be useful, she said, for lighting the fires. Her hearer gave a whimsical laugh, as, holding Ronald's hand, he guided the child across the stepping-stones. They were a couple of lameters, he told Tiny, who strode in front, swinging the bell noiselessly by its clapper, and needed time to make them keep to the right path—so much time that Margaret, coming behind, found leisure for her attention to be challenged by

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

something in the newspaper which she held in her hand.

"I see they have been having some horrible outrages in Ireland," she commented aloud; "but, as they say here, the real criminals are not the ignorant people who do these things: they are the agitators——"

"Who are ignorant people, too, perhaps," interrupted Magnus sharply. "Come on, Ronald. What's the matter?"

He stood on the last stone, the child on the stone behind, his small white face puzzled.

"What's a' man's name?" he asked gravely.

Margaret, arrested perforce, laid her hand on the boy's shoulder; so for a space he formed a link between those two, the man and the woman.

"What man?" she said.

"The man comin' after the naughty man always?" continued Ronald, nodding his head in remorseless assent—"the man with a big bluggy sword all a-dwipping, that wuns and wuns an' wuns till he catches a bad man at the welly latest stone."

"The avenger of blood, Ronald," said Magnus, with a quick look at Margaret. "You are unforgiving people, you islanders, Mrs. Macdonald."

But Margaret, coming behind, had forgotten

## TORQUIL'S DUNE

even the avenger of blood in a curiosity roused by the sight of those two—the man and the child walking through the heather hand in hand.

“You never told me your name,” she said suddenly—“your Christian name, I mean.”

Magnus, who had looked round hastily, paused.

“Didn’t I? Neil—Neil Magnus. It is quite a common name in Ireland.”

## CHAPTER IX

### A SIGN

MARGARET was right in saying that Peter Macfie was in a vile temper. In truth, he felt himself ill-used, despite the fact that there was no lack of customers in his queer little shop, where everything was to be found from arrowroot to artificial flowers, and everything smelt alike of salt herring, tar, and tobacco. How, indeed, could trade be slack when the two great festivals of the island year were close at hand—the one temporal, the other spiritual—in other words, the cattle market and the annual communion? As a rule, Peter Macfie was easy in his dealings at this time, partly because he generally knew to a sixpence what everyone was likely to get for their stirks, and so could apportion credit fairly; and partly because, as elder of the kirk, he thought it redounded to his credit that every woman, old or young, in the island, should have a new dress for the sacrament. Indeed, the very women

## A SIGN

themselves were scarcely more punctilious on this point than he, and they would as soon have gone to the great service without any clothes at all as in the sin-stained, toil-worn garments of the past year. That would be primarily an insult to the occasion ; secondarily, a confession of poverty none would care to make.

But this year he was a changed man as he stood behind his scrap of a counter among the packets of starch and tea, the boot-laces, stay-busks, iron nails, lollipops, and Heaven knows what, of his commerce. Mistress Maclean from Tolstay, who had three daughters to fit out, averred she had never known him so stiff over an old half-penny, so ill to give half an inch over strict measurement, so limited in his store of Gaelic—for Peter was a Paisley body, and used the fact to check any exuberance of haggling in his shop. Up to a certain point of profit—which he always carried firmly fixed in his mind's eye—he would bargain in very fair Gaelic ; but once that was past, his vocabulary became more and more limited, ending at last in a Glasgow twang which no one could understand.

Still, he gave no hint of the reason, beyond darkling wishes that they might never find a harder merchant to deal with, until one day old

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Kirsty Mackenzie from Scarva walked over laboriously to purchase her Communion dress—her wedding garment, as it were—since in such estimation was it held by the island folk. She was a tall, rather frail-looking old woman, and she lived in the left-hand compartment of a windowless hovel—one of the worst in Scarva—where Kate-*gorach* lodged in the right-hand compartment with old Flora Mackenzie. They were far-off cousins, these two—Kirsty and Flora—and had been cronies ever since they were girls together fifty years before, in the days when poor Kate had lost her lover. And these two had lost some also, if tales were true, through unspoken rivalry, and that mutual deprecation of each other's admirers so common amongst girls. So in their old age they lived in one hovel with but a wooden partition between them. But Flora got half a crown a week for keeping the parish idiot, while Kirsty had to eke out a livelihood by spinning and carding and weaving. Though she was too proud to complain, Kirsty thought this unkind of Fate, especially since Kate was oftener on her side of the compartment than on Flora's, the fact being that Kirsty was kinder, and had on occasion a sup-tea and a bite-loaf-bread for the poor natural, which was more, she

## A SIGN

told herself, than Flora had, despite the two and sixpence.

Of late, however, Kirsty had given up envy, being, in truth, more satisfied with her own lot, since the three shillings a yard for tweed which Margaret had paid her, and that auditing and settling of Peter's bill, had set her free from much anxiety. Even if her back *was* stiffening, her hands growing less deft from age, still, that difference of a shilling a yard in what she sold, that sixpence in what she bought, would enable her to live on fewer webs.

So she had put on her last year's dress, and trudged away to Peter Macfie's for the new one cheerfully. The shop held two or three substantial matrons from other townships when she entered it, and the owner—as he measured out the extra half-yard made necessary by his extreme accuracy for Mistress Maclean of Tolstay—told himself that here was the very opportunity he had been awaiting for reading the island a lesson. So he greeted her with thanks for looking in as a friend, and bade her be seated till he could find leisure for a crack.

Kirsty looked at him in surprise.

“I have come to buy my new dress,” she said simply; “there is a black one with



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

a violet sprig, they were saying, if it is not too dear."

"Mayhap Mistress Macdonald has it in her shop," replied Peter suavely. "I should advise you to go to her. It is ill for poor folk having many accounts; besides, you have closed yours with me."

The matrons paused in their choosings open-mouthed. Here, indeed, was a pretty to-do! But the blood flew to Kirsty's pale face. She realized in a moment the horror of her position.

"I will bring you my next web," she faltered; "by my word, I will; and Mrs. Macdonald is not selling anything but tea and sugar."

Peter smiled. "Is she not? I was thinking to be sending her the drapery traveller when he comes next week. But she will have money to lend on account, maybe, as I have always had for my customers. Then you can bring the pennies for the dress, and for the loaf-bread and other things you may be wanting, Kirsty; for it is as well not to have two accounts, is it not, Mistress Maclean?"

Mrs. Maclean, who Peter knew by his ledger had so far fallen from grace as to purchase an odd pound or two of tea from Margaret, hastily replied that it was; but she did not venture to

## A SIGN

face the propriety of Kirsty being refused a wedding garment. Peter himself did, however, and laid down his position briefly. If folk chose to distrust him, he, in self-defence, must distrust them. They were welcome to deal with Mistress Macdonald if they chose, but if he did not make what he considered a fair profit in Westray, he must go where he could make it ; and then every man-jack in the island would have to pay his bill, scot and lot, without anyone to audit the account. The idea of this was appalling, even to those who had stirks to sell at the coming market ; and Kirsty, now her web was gone, had nothing to sell. But as she listened with a whitening face she was not thinking of the future, or of any lack of the miscellaneous luxury of Peter's store ; she thought only of her wedding garment. It was scarcely credible that she should be without one after all these years ; and yet she turned away from the shop without a word of appeal.

But as she toiled back Scarva-wards empty-handed, the tears coursed slowly down her cheeks in self-pity, for she felt ill-used. Mrs. Macdonald, it is true, had given her three instead of two shillings a yard for her tweed, but, then, Peter would only have asked an instalment of his

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

debt, and so she would have had as much, if not more, cash in hand. Then, though the precept, "Owe no man anything," was in the Word, so was the injunction not to "forsake the assembly"; yet how could she possibly sit next Flora at the Lord's table in clothes which had been to many a worldly function, especially when Flora had a new spotted alpaca?

Kirsty felt so tired with her fruitless walk, so vaguely dispirited at the general outlook, that as she stopped to enter the low door gaping in the rough boulder walls which sloped inwards, she felt inclined to go to bed there and then; but a certain dogged desire to suffer solidly, since suffer she must, deterred her. Besides, at best, it was cold comfort, even in summer, creeping into a dark wooden bunk filled with straw, especially when the blankets were ragged and worn. She would need more covering for the winter; but where was it to come from? By force of habit, Kirsty told herself that the Lord would provide; by force of habit also she doubted whether He would. How could He, briefly, when Peter Macfie would not? The old woman, seated by the smouldering peat-fire which burnt in the centre of the hovel, as she carded away at the tufts of brown wool for another web—since

## A SIGN

no time must be lost in propitiation—was all reverence in her soul ; but her poor old body had lived too long in the world not to know the limitations of life ; not to know that, though she feared God and kept His commandments as one of the elect, life in that wigwam was bound to be hard. But to-day, wearied, disheartened as she was, this knowledge came burdened with a still more disturbing doubt. Was she, after all, one of the elect ? Might not this hint to stay away from the feast mean that she was not invited ? In which case—a perfectly conceivable one to her Calvinistic dogma—had Flora been rejected also, or had *she* her passport to the skies ? The possibility of such an end to that pathetically kindly and unkindly rivalry which had begun with the girl's first lovers, made Kirsty's withered hands fall idly from the carding comb, made her sit staring into the peats—where, half mechanically, she had set a teapot to brew comfort—as if their glow were a foreshadowing of hell-fire ; made her finally throw her apron up over her head, as if to shut out the sight.

She herself, however, remained as a sight to bring a fierce pity to most hearts, as she sate rocking herself backwards and forwards over the embers, lost in a spiritual terror, whimpering

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

over her own damnation in the darkness and silence and solitude of her toil-worn apron. Not that there was much light to shut out. To begin with, her old eyes were dim ; and then there was only the grey glimmer of the long northern day, which lingers for hours after the sun has gone, showing through the open door beyond the circling, drifting blue smoke, seeking there its only outlet. But such light as there was caught the polish of the spinning-wheel behind old Kirsty, and, bringing it into high relief, made it seem as if the bent, almost formless, figure were bound to it—a victim to the wheel of torture. Nor was there noise or company to shut out, either ; her dim old ears heard little, and the only living thing was a moulting hen, warming its feet disconsolately on the peat ashes. After a time, however, the tears passed to prayers, with the remembrance that doubt was a wile of the devil.

“ Forsake me not ! Give me a sign ; give me a certainty.”

The quavering old voice had the compartment to itself, as it went on :

“ It is so easy for Thee, Lord,” moaned Kirsty ; “ all things are in Thy hand. Thou art King. Thou canst put on glorious apparel !”—here a vision of that dress-piece in Peter Macfie’s shop did

## A SIGN

duty for the sign of salvation—"Out of the deep I call—out of the deep. Thou canst send . . ."

Kirsty started as if she had been shot, at the touch of something cold on her outstretched, petitioning hands, which were hidden—like the rest of the world—from her tear-dimmed eyes by the apron.

The next minute she sat staring stupidly at a gold watch and chain—staring at the mystery of its appearance there, with her soul all confused by the conflicting claims of faith and fact. But just as her bodily fingers closed tighter and tighter on the latter, so her spiritual hold clung desperately to the former. It was a miracle, a direct answer to prayer. It must be—it should be—it was.

So, with a turmoil of passionate desire beating down her common sense, old Kirsty fell on her knees and gave thanks. Yet when, after a time, her crony returned to the other side of the smoke-blackened wooden partition, and came in to see her neighbour, full of veiled concern for what she had heard from the gossips on their way home from Peter Macfie's shop, Kirsty's tongue was tied alike from praise or triumph. And wherefore not? she asked herself fiercely. Were not such miracles of grace best kept a secret

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

between a soul and its Maker ? “Let not the right hand know what the left hand doeth !” Poor Kirsty’s knowledge of the Word supplied her with a text more or less applicable to all phases of thought ; yet when there was no longer any reason for refusing that cold comfort of bed, and she crept among the straw and the tattered blankets, the gold watch under her hard pillow seemed to make it harder, so that she lay awake long after Flora’s loud breathing told of righteous sleep.

It was about a week after this that Morrison the pedlar, slouching furtively to Scarva with the little box of Brummagem jewellery with which, once or twice a year before markets and communions, he tempted the vanity of the Outer Hebrides, from the Butt of the Lews to Barra, found old Kirsty beckoning to him at the door of her hut. He stared at her incredulously for a minute, for he knew his own reputation and hers also. Then, being accustomed in his line of business to secrecy, he followed her in and shut the door.

The next day Kirsty went down to Peter Macfie’s shop and paid defiantly over the counter for the wedding garment of black sprigged with violet, a new black jet aigrette, a violet ribbon for her bonnet, and a pair of new black gloves.



## A SIGN

“Sixpence change from a pound,” remarked Peter laconically, ringing the coin on the counter as defiantly. Then his temper got the better of him. People might do as they likes, he said; they might talk big of unfairness, but what were they doing with their loans and their gifts, and their three shillings a yard, but take an unfair advantage of him, an honest merchant, who had to make his living? It was a stealing of his profits, a deliberate robbery——

Kirsty’s hand trembled over the sixpence.

“Whisht, man, whisht!” she said in the Gaelic; “it is the Lord’s doings, and it is right in His eyes.”

But as she went out of the shop, clasping her parcel tight, her step wavered a little.

“She is far through, is old Kirsty,” remarked Peter to another customer.

“Ay,” replied the woman cheerfully, “it will mayhap be her last Sacrament.”



## CHAPTER X

### AMATEUR DETECTIVES

PETER MACFIE was in a worse temper than ever. Kirsty, from her point of view, might say it was the Lord's doing that she should have a wedding garment, but from the merchant's it seemed to be something very different: it was a direct challenge from Mrs. Macdonald—for that she had lent Kirsty the money was clear. Where else could the old woman have raised a whole pound?

Now, Peter in his way was not a bad soul. Like most people, except gross criminals, he kept fairly within his own moral bounds, and if he was mean, grasping, or unjust, that was not so much the fault of his conduct as of his ideals. This challenge of Margaret's, then, appeared to him unjustifiable, and warranted him in making every reprisal he could legally make. To begin with, it was clear that if Mrs. Macdonald had pounds to spare for every old wife in the parish, she should be just before she was generous.

For instance, she should provide her tenants

## AMATEUR DETECTIVES

with decent houses to live in before she cockered them up with wedding garments. Peter, being a member of the District Board, together with the bank agent, found no difficulty in bringing this point to the notice of the sanitary inspector, who was appointed by the Board. There could, of course, be no denial of certain facts. The Scarva houses were disgraceful to a Christian country, and for many years past had been the nucleus of every fever epidemic in the island. Even Dr. Gilchrist, though he scouted the idea of the proprietor being bound to rebuild what he had only refrained from pulling down out of sheer charity, could not, as health officer, help certifying to the truth, the result being that Margaret received a formal notice to put the Scarva houses into sanitary repair.

“Throw it into the waste-paper basket,” said Magnus, to whom she went in hot indignation; for beneath his careless irresponsibility she had learnt to recognize a practical knowledge of most of the vexed questions of her position which surprised her, even though he had told her he was a barrister by profession. “There is only one house—the original one of the croft—about which there can be question, but there is no use in telling them so.”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“But I must answer it—I must deny my responsibility—I must refute——”

“I wouldn’t,” he interrupted, with a smile. “Let them stew in their own juice. It is the best way of cooking public bodies—what Sydney Smith terms corporations—makes them tender! I know it by experience, but grilling over a hot fire of righteous wrath, with salt and pepper, bedevils them.”

Margaret, however, while admitting it might be less provocative to say nothing, held it her duty to testify, the more so because Magnus took the opportunity of once again urging on her the futility of wasting her life on Westray. So she not only wrote a dignified refusal to consider the question at all, but a point-blank denial of jurisdiction. The houses, she said, would be pulled down altogether if anybody—even a corporation—attempted to interfere with her son’s rights.

This was a challenge indeed, and the news of it soon filtered through the island, rousing a vague resentment. Peter Macfie himself discussed the legal aspect of the question over various tumblers of whisky toddy in the parlour of the inn, and the outcome was always regret that Mistress Macdonald refused to carry out the dead laird’s intention of selling the island.

## AMATEUR DETECTIVES

“But I heard it was sold, Mr. Macfie,” said the fussy little traveller in drapery, to whom, as a new recipient, the merchant was confiding his wrongs after the business of autumn stock-taking was over. “Let me see—I’m sure I heard it somewhere.”

He was rewinding a sample of lace, and Peter, who, out of sheer despite, had refrained from giving his usual orders, on the ground of competition, shook his head moodily, saying that Mr. Jones might have heard it anywhere: there had been enough talk about it.

Mr. Jones paused in his winding to exclaim: “Of course! That reminds me! It was in the commercial room—let me see!—of the Roe-buck?—or was it—— Stay! I am almost sure it was in Glasgow. Anyhow, I heard it from a gentleman, whose name I didn’t know. By the way, I believe it was in some hotel I went into with another gentleman. My memory isn’t——”

Peter yawned aggressively. “Was I sayin’ twa pieces o’ yon magenty mariny, mister?” he asked, “for if I did, I’m thinkin’ I’ll no——”

The winding of lace began vehemently, as the winder affected not to hear. “Yes, of course, it was about a deed of sale——”

Peter pricked up his ears. “What deed of sale?”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“A deed of sale the laird had made out and signed. I remember perfectly. We were talking about slips between the cup and the lip, and this man—I *think* he was in hardware—said he had witnessed a deed of sale just before a man died. And it turned out to be Westray. It was in the parlour of the inn here, and——”

Peter let his hand fall heavily on the counter.

“Dod’s, man !” he said ; “I mind the falla weel, though he was a stranger, and I didna deal wi’ him. He was here the verra nicht. My conscience ! The laird must hae had it on him when he was drooned. Weel, weel, there’s no accounting for the ways of Providence. Why couldna he have left it behind him ? For it’s little use it will be to him in the next world, an’ we are in sair want o’ it here.”

Either way, it was a grand piece of gossip, so, when the accounts were made up, and both bag-man and bags had hustled on board the hooting steamer, Peter strolled back to the inn full of the news. He found Captain Trevanon talking to Magnus, who—rather to Margaret’s annoyance—had carried out his intention of migrating to the Clachan. That he should stay in Westray was comprehensible, she admitted, if—as he said—he had been on a tour round the Highlands—so

## AMATEUR DETECTIVES

far as he could remember—when he was wrecked. But that was no reason why he should leave her house, where he could surely see as much as was needful of the island and the people. Whereupon he had laughed, saying she was making herself too unpopular for his purpose, and that if he was to be ready for punching Peter's head, he had better be on the spot.

So there he was, talking to the skipper with that bright-eyed familiarity both with the topic of conversation and the speakers which had already made him a general favourite. The former, however, was less pronounced than usual with Captain Trevanon, whose curiosity regarding the mysterious wreck remained still unsatisfied ; for, in sober truth, Magnus had as yet but a glimmering remembrance of a voyage—nothing more.

“ I certainly was in America not long before, and in Ireland also, but I can't get at the date,” he was saying lightly, as Peter came in. “ For, you see, I was travelling about here, there, and everywhere, as the fancy took me, without keeping up communication with my friends for the time, so that I have really no means of verifying my vague recollections. It's a queer freak of Memory's, certainly ; but she is as fickle as Fortune.”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

"Weel, she's a jade, if you like," broke in Peter, brimming over with information. Captain Trevanon took his pipe out of his mouth and listened open-mouthed. He remembered the stranger perfectly, remembered, also, that the laird had been *distract* with the air of a man who had something on his mind. And then he and Peter began running over the events of that memorable evening, tracing the dead man's actions from the time of his appearance in the parlour to his disappearance down the cliff.

"Ay, ay !" said the skipper conclusively ; " in a mist like Gideon's fleece, as white as the gulls' wings, and just a low keen in the wind like the gull's cry. He must have had it in his coat pocket——"

" But he was in his shirt-sleeves," said Magnus suddenly, in a quick, low voice. " I remember it perfectly."

He was sitting with his hand to his forehead, frowning out, as it were, on something which had presented itself to him unasked. " Yes," he went on, still in that absorbed voice, " he was in his shirt-sleeves. I remember it all perfectly now. I was in a fishing-smack coming over from Ireland, and a big ship ran us down in the fog. She was in difficulties herself, I remember, for



## AMATEUR DETECTIVES

she signalled just afterwards ; cut us in two, and slid on like a ghost ! She mayn't have seen us even. There wasn't time to sing out or to catch hold. By Jove ! the water was cold ; but I kept going, though my foot was crushed. Yes ! he came down the rope in his shirt-sleeves ; I remember that, and the white mist and the gulls. And then I suppose I must have got that bash on my head."

Captain Trevanon was all ears for more, but Peter Macfie's attention was arrested.

"Then what became of his coat," he interrupted excitedly—"the coat with the deed of sale in it ?"

Magnus's face lost its absorbed look in a sort of blank surprise. "By Jove !" he said half to himself. "I never thought of that. That would make a difference."

Captain Trevanon laid his glass down deliberately.

"I believe you're right, sir. Now that you mention it, I seem to remember the shirt-sleeves. I am sure——"

But Magnus interrupted him with a shrug of the shoulders. The thought of Margaret's possible vexation had brought with it a regret for having said anything. "It is more than I am,



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

however ; for, of course, I was but half conscious at the time. Besides, I have no claim to confidence in the matter of memory. I wouldn't swear to it, anyhow." He rose as he spoke, and lounged out of the room indifferently, leaving Peter with a disappointed face.

"I wouldn't swear to it, either," remarked Captain Trevanon. "But someone else may remember—Red Dugald, for instance. I saw him in the kitchen just now—he held the rope with Angus Mohr. That's another man, by the way, who ought to know——"

"Ay," replied Peter quickly. "He should ken about the laird's coat, and the deed, too ; for, if you mind, skipper, he was with the laird in this very room. Mark my words, Captain Trevanon, there is more in this story than meets the ear, and if there was a deed, and if the coat was no' on the laird, I'd like fine to ken where they are."

The skipper looked at him doubtfully. Peter was not a favourite of his, and there was a Guy Fawkes tone of mystery in these darkling hints which ill-suited the bluff sailor. "Well, I won't swear to anything, either," he said, out of sheer contrariety.

The bank agent, however, who came in while Red Dugald was being questioned, was more

## AMATEUR DETECTIVES

sympathetic. He had not been on the cliff, but he set great store by Dugald's unhesitating corroboration of the shirt-sleeves ; the more so because no hint had been given him of the reason for desiring the information. In short, he said, if Angus Mohr agreed also, they might, without further question, accept the fact that the laird's coat was somewhere within reach, or had been within reach. If it were not, there was little use in raking up the question of signature, so that was the first point to settle. It would be as well, therefore, to see Angus at once, and as he was carting peat in the Clachan Bog, he would not be far to seek.

So the two set off, greatly elated at the chance of distinguishing themselves in the detective line, and laying down rules for their own guidance in cross - examination after the Sherlock-Holmes method as they went along.

Red Dugald, meanwhile, went hurrying back to Scarva, whence he had come for the sole purpose of buying a pink ribbon to celebrate Ishbel's first appearance after her long illness. It was to give colour to her cheeks, he said fondly, as he sate beside her, holding her hand, and telling her all the news he had gathered in the village—of Magnus, the Man from the Sea, having left

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Mistress Macdonald's to live at the inn ; of the traveller from whom he had bought the ribbon ; and of Peter Macfie's inquiry about the laird's coat.

There was no lack of colour then in Ishbel's face. "His coat," she echoed quite in a flutter—"he took it off here in the cottage and put on an oilskin instead. But Angus gave the coat back that very same day to Mistress Macdonald. I know he did. So, if they are wanting it, they should be asking her for it."

"I will be telling him that next time I see him," said Dugald. "And you must leave talking for just now, Ishbel ; your hand is all trembling. It will be the weakness, no doubt, for there is nothing to trouble you in the laird's coat, whatever."

"Nothing," said Ishbel, trying to smile.

## CHAPTER XI

### AN ENDLESS BAND

THE roundabout system of inquiry is, according to detective stories, generally successful in preventing all and sundry from feeling the dry suction of the professional pump ; but it failed with Angus, who had a dirty conscience in regard to the events of that misty night.

So he took alarm at the beginning, and, with the stolid resistance of a big black stirk barring the roadway, refused to remember anything. A stranger ? Ay, there might have been a stranger in the parlour. A paper ? Ay, there might have been a paper in the laird's pocket ; but he knew nothing of it—nothing whatever. And when, with baffled looks, the two detectives began to inquire as to what path the laird and he had taken when they went off together with the lantern, he was sharp enough to see that he had given himself away in denials, and that his object now was to prevent any discovery which might

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

prove he had been lying about the deed. It was, in short, an endless band of deceit, for he had denied knowledge of the deed to minimize questions regarding the pocket which contained it, and now had to deny knowledge of the pocket, lest its contents should bear witness against him. Nevertheless, with that odd desire to lie as little as possible, to which he clung like a limpet, he stuck to the truth as far as he could. He had taken the Scarva path—had paused there a second to get fire for the beacon. And the laird had certainly worn an oilskin coat, which he had taken off before going down the rope. Mr. Macfie must remember this himself, surely, since he had picked it up and put it aside ?

“Ay,” assented Peter reluctantly, after a moment’s pause. “That is so, Mr. Campbell. I mind it weel, and Dr. Gilchrist was wantin’ something to put over the Man from the Sea when he was being carried up to the house, so I fetched it. But it could not be in that, whatever, and I’m maist sure it was a blue serge he had on when he sate in the parlour.”

Big Angus, piling away with unusual speed at the peats to hide his trepidation, heaved a sigh of relief. If a coat of some kind that the laird had worn had been taken up to the big house that

## AN ENDLESS BAND

night, he had not told Ishbel such a very big lie, after all. It was one, at any rate, which might be turned to account in this most unforeseen and inconvenient inquiry. He had never spoken to his sister on the subject of the coat since he had carried her back to bed in a dead faint, nor had she alluded to it. Possibly, he had told himself, she had forgotten all about it, or treated it as a part of the feverish delirium. He must warn her again to keep a canny tongue in her head, and that as soon as might be, since people were sure to begin talking.

So, when the baffled inquirers left him, he carted the load of peats to its destination and set off homewards. And as he slouched along, he thought of the deed of sale. Could it really have been that ? he asked himself. If so, what a pity it was he had not known before he went crooked ! It would have been more worth his while to go straight. That, however, was impossible now ; so Ishbel must be made either to hold her tongue or corroborate his account. But how ? What reason could he give for counselling caution, which would not arouse her suspicions of his previous story ? He decided finally on telling her frankly of this inquiry, and advising her to keep out of it, since he and Dugald unfortu-

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

nately differed as to details ; and the latter, having an evil temper, seemed inclined to quarrel over the contradiction. This, he felt, would be the strongest argument he could use, since her illness had sobered Ishbel and made her anxious to settle down and marry her lover, lest a worse thing might befall.

He found her still seated behind the peat-stack—that recreation-room of the Hebrides—wrapped up in a warm shawl, fingering the pink ribbon which Dugald had left her, and generally enjoying her return to everyday life. The air had made her cheeks match the pink ribbon, and Angus, as he came up, remarked on it. A girl was always easier to manage when you began by praising her looks.

“Dugald gave it me,” she said happily, “and I was able to walk out here by myself. Only think of it, my dearest ! and I so near dying. It is all too good, and I am so glad to be able to tell Dugald the truth, now that folk are making inquiries about the coat.”

Angus gave her a look startling in its wild temper. “Didn’t I warn you to keep a canny tongue ?” he began blusteringly, then pulled himself up sharp. “What was it you were telling him, Ishbel darling ? That the laird

## AN ENDLESS BAND

was wearing an oilskin coat, and that it was going back to Mistress Macdonald that same day ?”

Ishbel’s big dark eye met his in doubt and alarm. “The oilskin coat ! But it was not that. It was the blue——”

Angus rapped out an oath. “It was not that I was meaning, anyhow, so have a care ! For, see you, Dugald is telling a different tale from me and you, and he is not one that will be contradicted.”

“He told *me* the same,” she replied steadily, with something of his own temper. “He said the laird must have left his coat somewhere, since he had none on him. Is it a lie you have been telling me ? Did you stand at my grave with an untruth on your lips, Angus Mohr ? Did you cheat death——”

This was too much for her brother’s calm. Did his sister mean to bring ill-luck on him with such wild words ? Angus dropped suddenly on his knee beside her, and gripped her wrist hard.

“Don’t be a fool-woman,” he whispered fiercely, “but listen to me, Ishbel, my heart. I told you that Mistress Macdonald got back the coat the laird was wearing, and that is God’s truth. For the rest I don’t care. You may think me a thief, and I’ll think *you* one if I choose.



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

But if you tell tales that are not true, I can tell some that are. It is not asking you to lie I am, Ishbel ; but to say no more than this, that I told you that the coat the laird was wearing was sent up to the big house, as it was. If you say more, I'll say more, too ; so promise."

Ishbel rose unsteadily to her feet, trying to match his passion with her own, as she had done many a time, found she could not, and burst into a storm of tears. She did not understand what he would be at, she sobbed—or what he meant—and it was very unkind of him—she would have her' revenge some time, but meanwhile she supposed——

"That's right, my dearest," broke in Angus, catching at the least concession. "'Tis for your own good I ask it, because of Dugald's temper ; and it is but for a wee while till you are married on him. Then you can tell him what you like."

So, with an infinite relief at having succeeded so far, he lounged off to look at his stirks on the moorland common, for the market was nigh at hand, and he was anxious about their condition. He found Red Angus there already, giving his an evening bite of straw and meal. "You should do it also, Angus, man," said the latter, glancing

## AN ENDLESS BAND

with a smirk of satisfied possession from his beasts to his neighbour's. "If you don't put a glisten to them, it is not much they will be fetching whatever, and it is a bit ragged——"

"They look well enough for me," interrupted Angus sullenly. "And when wife an' bairns come to your hearth, Dugald, you'll have little meal to waste on a stirk's coat."

Dugald's coming frown faded at the word. "As for coats," he said eagerly, "yon' was a queer questioning of Peter Macfie's. What will he be wanting the laird's coat for? But you will have told him, likely, as I did——"

"I know nothing of the laird's coat," put in Angus stolidly.

Dugald stared at him. "But Ishbel was sayin'," he began.

"Ishbel only knows what I told her, and that is that the laird was taking off the oilskin, and it was sent up to the big house with the Man from the Sea. That is all she can be knowing, and that has nothing to do with Macdonald's own coat that will be at the bottom of the sea with the laird himself."

"At the bottom of the sea?" echoed Dugald derisively. "*Horo!* Angus, man, where are your wits? when it was in his shirt-sleeves——"

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Angus cut in with a contemptuous laugh. “*Horo!* Dugald, where were your eyes? It was not in his shirt-sleeves at all, though it is nothing to nobody, and there is no need to quarrel over it. And keep a hand with the straw, Dugald man, or it is dying of surfeit the beasts will be before they are sold, and how will you marry Ishbel, and give her ribbons? She will be taking one who can.”

As he lounged back after this Parthian shaft, leaving Dugald blazing with anger, he told himself Ishbel deserved this back-hander. If she had only kept a still tongue in her head, there would have been no need for all this lying, but women were kittle-cattle.

Peter Macfie made the same remark to himself that evening as he sate in solitary state drinking cold whisky-and-water in the little room behind the shop. He found a certain justification for the remark in a suggestion which even the bank agent had scouted as impossible—scouted so cavalierly that Peter, feeling outraged, had retired in dudgeon from the parlour of the inn, since, after all, he had quite as much experience in Sherlock-Holmes business as anyone else on the island—excepting, perhaps, Mr. Magnus, who seemed to know everything; though, of course, seeing what a

## AN ENDLESS BAND

friend he was of Mistress Macdonald's, no one would venture to ask *his* opinion in this matter. That, however, did not alter the fact that women were kittle, and Mistress Macdonald more so than most. Then who could deny that she had openly expressed her intention of keeping the island by hook or by crook? Now, was that a person to be interested in the safe keeping of a deed of sale?

Peter, before he left the inn parlour, had just drunk enough toddy to desire more, and now the cold whisky-and-water gave him no comfort at all.

It was not an accusation he was making against the good lady, he told himself moodily. He, an elder of the Kirk and a pious Christian to boot, knew the virtue of charity. Nor was he going to blazon the suggestion abroad; still, when such possibilities existed, was it not a body's duty to put others on their guard?

Peter, who, as a rule, was a fairly abstemious man, helped himself to another glass savagely, and went on brooding.

Yes, it was a shame that a person should be allowed to go on infringing every known principle of commerce when she had no right even to be in the island; besides, was it just that a dead

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

man's deed should be burked and the poor folk deprived of a rich landlord? Anyhow, it could do no harm just to give the people who had a right to know a hint of what might have been—that was all.

So, after taking another fillip of whisky, he brought out pen and ink to set down on paper that a sincerewell-wisher thought that the circumstances regarding a certain deed which had been in the coat which the late Mr. Macdonald, of Westray, had taken off before going down the rocks to his death, should be inquired into for the sake of all concerned.

This last phrase removed a faint lingering distaste to his own action, since it was manifestly to Mistress Macdonald's advantage that she should not be suspected; and if a suspicion had occurred to him, Peter, who knew his duty to his neighbour, what might not less charitable folk be thinking?

So he copied out the precious document, addressed one copy to Evan Macdonald, the other to Mr. Begbie, and then went to bed feeling he had done a disagreeable duty.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE LAIRD'S COAT

WHEN Magnus—after the skipper's graphic description of its environment had recalled the coatless figure which had come down the rocks to save him—strolled out of the inn parlour with assumed indifference, he was actuated partly by a sudden impulse to save Margaret all possible annoyance, partly to give himself time to realize the change that perfect memory made in his own position. The last rag of truth had, as it were, slipped from his fiction of forgetfulness, leaving it naked, and, in sooth, ashamed. The past blank, small though he could not help suspecting it must be, had yet been an excuse for shirking his own identity ; but now he must either take this up, or deliberately conceal it, and he did not wish to do either : he only wished, with a desire which grew every hour, to stand between Margaret and the life she had mapped out for herself. It was such an insensate waste of all that was

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

best in her. As he sate on the rocks, after his wont, chucking pebbles into the sea idly while he let his voice practise its powers over long orations in Greek or Latin, he was thinking that, after all, the truest kindness would be to make her useless struggle shorter, if sharper; to turn her out, briefly, from Westray—just as she proposed to oust the cottars of Scarva—for their ultimate good. In sober truth there was little to choose between the two cases. Both backed sentiment against sense, both denied the latter-day gospel that the only right of humanity was the right to get as much material comfort out of this world—your neighbour included—as you could. Yes! it would be a godsend if the deed, or anything else which would render her position untenable, did turn up. Should he forge one? he asked himself whimsically, or should he go up to her then and there, tell her the truth, and plead and threaten her out of this dream of duty—tell her, for instance, that he loved her, and would teach her so to love him that she would forget the rest of it? He felt that the task would be a pleasant one; far more pleasant than the other alternative of leaving Westray, of returning to common sense and actualities. His dislike to the latter grew also, so that, after a time, he



## THE LAIRD'S COAT

settled to wait a day or two, just to see if anything did turn up—if, for instance, he would have to punch Peter's head. For, as Margaret used sometimes to complain, he was never serious for two moments together over Westray affairs; to which complaint he would reply that he had some artistic perceptions, and that to be serious over the situation would be like turning "Midsummer Night's Dream" into a tragedy, since all its attraction for him lay in its present unreality.

This was the solid truth of the matter. Nevertheless, he felt inclined to make the joke into earnest when, before the week he had given himself was out, Dr. Gilchrist, returning from an out-lying tour, came to him full of the story which he had just heard at Peter's shop, with, however, a new rider to it, which brought a quick frown to his hearer's face.

"Who says the coat was taken up to Westray House?" he asked sharply.

"Who? Oh, I think it was Dugald or Angus—someone who knew, anyhow," replied the doctor carelessly. "So, as Peter said, that ends the story of the deed—the story altogether, in fact; and, upon my soul, I'm glad. The laird did his wife enough harm in his lifetime, as even Peter agreed; indeed, he went so far



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

as to say that, in his opinion, she would almost have been justified in—in suppressing the deed if——”

“That was very considerate of Mr. Macfie,” interrupted Magnus as calmly as he could. He would dearly have liked to go down to Peter’s shop then and there, but he knew he could make no greater mistake than to set folks’ tongues wagging. His wisest course lay in warning Margaret what to expect, and making a last appeal to her common sense before he either left her or told her the truth. He had hardly made up his mind which to do as he sat waiting for her to come to him in the drawing-room at Westray House ; but the sight of her looking pale and worried gave him an insane desire to take possession of her, as it were, and to force her to his way of thinking.

“I’m glad you came to-day,” she said, advancing to meet him with an open letter in her hand. “I was just going to send you this. Read it, please.”

There was a firm set about her mouth, a distinct gleam of anger in her eyes as she stood watching him nervously.

“Evan enclosed it to me,” she went on as he read, “he *says* to show how unwise I am in

## THE LAIRD'S COAT

making enemies ; but I believe he half credits the story, though it is a lie from beginning to end, isn't it ?”

The question was a challenge, short and sharp. Magnus, hearing it, recognized that her object had been to find out if the story was new to him ; and, having discovered from his face that it was not, she meant to know everything he had to tell.

“ Not quite,” he replied, acquiescing instantly. “ It is true your husband had no coat on when he came down the rope to save me. I ought to have told you this and some other things when the memory of them recurred to me three or four days ago—I will tell you why I did not by-and-by. Meanwhile I can only say that I am convinced there is not a word of truth in the rest of the story, and as for the suggestion—by Heaven ! I'll kill that brute Macfie ! It is intolerable, absurd !” He paused, partly before his own wrath, partly at something he did not understand in her face, as she moved on a step to lay the letter—which he had returned—on her writing-table.

“ I do not consider the suggestion absurd,” she said coldly. “ I call it the only natural end—the only possible thing for me to have done.”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Her back was towards him, but there was enough expression in the vigorous white hand which was laying down the accusation indifferently, to make him say quickly :

“ You mean, to suppress it ? ”

She faced round on him, crimson to her forehead.

“ Yes, to burn it ! What right had it to exist ? None. I told Evan so at the time, for I have known about the deed from the beginning. I told him so when he was angry about my looking through the papers alone. I tell you so now, and I will tell Peter Macfie, or anyone else who dares to question my right, the same. I will say : ‘ Think what you choose. The right thing to do was to burn it. ’ ”

Magnus stood speechless for a moment, full of admiration for her spirit, full, also, of real alarm at the danger of such words.

“ My dear Mrs. Macdonald,” he began at last, “ think this, by all means, if it pleases you ; but don’t say it. Can’t you see what a false impression it may give ? ”

“ How do you know it *is* false ? ” she interrupted hotly. “ And what does it matter whether it is or not—whether I have done this thing, or have only wished to do it ? None. The guilt, if

## THE LAIRD'S COAT

guilt there be, is the same. So even *you* can think what you choose."

"I shall think what I know," he said almost sternly; "but others do not know you as I do, so, for Heaven's sake, Mrs. Macdonald, be reasonable—for Heaven's sake let me help you to crush this ridiculous suggestion. You don't know the people you have to deal with as I do—no, you don't! They don't mean badly, but they can't help being credulous. You can't pit yourself against them—you don't understand their methods of fight. My dear lady, it is absurd! I quite understand your feeling—I should feel so myself in your place——"

"Then you would say as I do," she interrupted. "You would say to things like that"—she pointed to the letter—" 'And if I did burn it, what else was there for me to do?' "

Despite his vexation, he could not help a smile.

"Then I shall have to punch Peter's head, after all," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Well, it will give me an occupation, and, to tell the truth, I was feeling so idle at the Clachan that I meant to flit South; but now——" He paused and looked at her oddly.

"And now——" she echoed anxiously.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“ I shall stop and do champion,” he continued deliberately—“ stop and do bully also, for I warn you I stick at nothing when I’m set on a thing. Fair means or foul are all the same to me. I shall stop and force you——” He had come a step nearer, and his voice had grown tender, yet insistent. She shrank back from his visible emotion, saying coldly :

“ You cannot possibly do champion when you do not know the rights or wrongs of the matter.”

He laughed gaily. “ My dear lady, that is quite a secondary consideration. I plead the cause I choose to plead, and my voice, being my fortune, I generally succeed. So that is settled ; and now, if you please, I should like to tell you some things you will like to know.”

He was conscious of a distinct relief at the turn affairs had taken. It was manifestly impossible to go away and leave her alone to face the inevitable result of her attitude, and it was equally impossible to make his remaining useless by destroying her confidence in him. So he could go on as he had been doing, without feeling a miserable impostor.

He told her, therefore, as he had said he would, “ things she would like to know,” and told them so well that the minutes slipped by swiftly, till

## THE LAIRD'S COAT

she rose suddenly with the old complaint that he made her forget, that he took her into a different world for a time.

"I wish I could for always," he said passionately. "I believe I could, too, if you would only let me; but you won't. But take care, Mrs. Macdonald; I warn you that I would give anything, do anything, to turn you out of your dull old world, just as you talk of turning the cottars out of Scarva."

"As I intend to turn them out, you mean," she corrected, glad once more to escape his emotion. "Mhairi Macinver was here yesterday, bringing Hugh Macleod to see me. He is so much improved, and is getting on splendidly. He seems set also on having the Scarva people; so, as he promised to give them all free passages, and make all arrangements on a three years' engagement, I mean to evict. It will give the District Board a lesson, too."

"You mean to evict?" he said, looking at her full in the eyes.

"I shall wait, of course, till the Board serves me with another notice to repair, and until Mr. Macleod's arrangements are made. Then I shall pull off the roofs and turn the people out on the hillside."

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“Remorselessly?”

“Yes, remorselessly,” she replied. “It is for their good, remember.”

He gave a theatrical sigh of relief.

“A Daniel come to judgment,” he said, with an odd smile; then added in a half-tone: “I thank thee, madam, for teaching me that word.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE BREATH OF SCANDAL

IF Mhairi Macinver on her parish rounds carried a certain hazel sapling with a crook to it such as shepherds use, as a walking-stick, all Westray knew that her mission was to bring strayed Truth back to the fold. So when, the day before the yearly cattle-market, old Flora, the worst gossip in the Scarva township, saw her coming across the moor bearing this staff of office, she lost no time in preparing defiance. In other words, she set one of her two chairs ready for the visitor as a lofty indication of her willingness to hear anything that all and sundry might have to say for, or to, or against her, and sate down in the other sedately with a pair of horn spectacles and a Bible.

This show of piety and preparation, however, had no effect upon Mhairi, who not only knew her adversary, but was also in a hurry to rejoin her lover, Hugh Macleod, who was to pass the



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

time necessary to reduce Flora to pulp in trying to knock a little common sense into the heads of some of the men regarding the settlement of New Westray. So she began her attack promptly, without even sitting down.

“What is all this I am hearing, Flora?” she said calmly; “and it so near the Communion, too, when folk should be thinking of more than stirring up strife. Agnes is saying that Sheenach was telling her that you were thinking there was more in the manner of the laird’s death than is known, since Angus and Dugald and Ishbel are all by the ears about it, and would be in blows soon. What sort of words are these, with the market-day to-morrow, when the whisky gets into men’s heads, and those two are jealous enough already over their stirks? As for the laird’s death, all know he met it like a brave, honest man; and it will be as well for some of us, Flora, if we meet it as fairly—as well, if some of us are in his shoes.”

“It is not his shoes at all they are quarrelling about, Miss Mhairi dear,” interrupted Flora, with mock innocence. “It will be his coat, so they are saying.”

Mhairi ignored the palpable contumacy, and went on unmoved. “Whether it is his coat or

## THE BREATH OF SCANDAL

shoes is nothing to you or to me, Flora ; but if you are spreading such reports, I will be telling the minister, that he may know before he gives the tokens. You are not to say such things, or tell Morag that Mrs. Macdonald has been giving Kirsty pounds on pounds of money to buy new dresses and what-not, when Mrs. Macdonald was telling me herself that she was giving nothing at all—though if she did, it would be nothing to me or to you.”

Flora gave a disdainful sniff. “ Deed ! an’ that’s true, Miss Mhairi dear ; it would be nothing to me whatever, though, praise be to the Lord ! I can clothe myself decently without charity or, maybe, worse than charity ; for if Mistress Macdonald was not giving the money, where was it coming from ? ”

Mhairi eyed her with supreme disfavour. “ You are in a very evil mind, Flora, and I will certainly be telling the minister. And you may well be clothing yourself decently out of the half-a-crown a week you are getting from the parish for *Kate-gorach*, for it is little clothing you give her out of it. And I was coming to tell you that, also—that it is a disgrace to see her as she is, and to ask what you are giving her for the Sacrament congregation ? ”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

This was a standing method, joined to a threat of reporting her neglect to the relieving officer, and getting him to hand the care of the idiot over to Kirsty, for reducing Flora to tears and repentance, but it failed to-day. Flora only tossed her head virtuously, and said that, for the matter of that, if folk were to have wedding garments gifted to them in Scarva, there was no reason why the parish should not clothe its own idiots. There was nothing as to dress in the bond.

“But there is more than potatoes in it, whatever,” interposed Mhairi, with concentrated scorn; “though it is little else she gets from you, Flora—little she would get at all but for Kirsty, as I will tell the officer.”

Flora sniffed again. “Then it is plenty she is getting from her this while back, anyhow,” she said sardonically; “and if Kirsty is finding it convenient to give it to her, that is nothing to you or to me, Miss Mhairi dear.”

“Nothing whatever,” assented Miss Mhairi dear cheerfully. “And it is nothing to me, either, that you are a very wicked old woman, with the face of a Christian and a heart like the back of a grate, but it will be something to you by-and-by, Flora, when the inside comes out.”

## THE BREATH OF SCANDAL

With which Parthian shot and a wave of her crook she called up Kate, who had been chuckling over some detached portions of her rags in the corner, and gave her a whole bright new shilling to buy a ribbon withal, since Flora was not honest enough to give her of her own, and then went off with unruffled dignity to Kirsty's side of the hovel, and began with unnecessary loudness of voice to thank her in the name of the parish for being kind to its fool. For Mhairi had the measure of her environment absolutely, and never erred, as Margaret did, in treating it on too high a plane.

Yet even she felt herself at a check when Kirsty, who was looking miserably pale and worn, went white and red by turns, protesting that she saw very little of Kate, and did not understand what Miss Mhairi meant.

"I am not understanding many things in Scarva myself, Kirsty," interrupted the young lady loftily; "but one thing is quite clear: I must send you some wine and medicine to take, or you will not be able to get to the Sacrament, and that would be a pity."

A pity! Poor old Kirsty, as she stood bobbing at the door to her departing visitor, called it by another name in her weary, confused old heart.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

That said, clear as the writing on the wall, that it would be damnation. For even faith had not been able to withstand fact, and she never attempted to deny to herself that *Kate-gorach* must have put the watch into her blind, petitioning hold. But in what guise? As God's fool or the Devil's advocate? The last few days had brought an additional terror to the question which she could not, would not, face; for if this talk of the coat were true, was she a thief? No! not that; but ought she not to tell—ought she not to give the clue? She lay awake among her ragged blankets night after night trying to decide between her innate honesty, her sound common sense, and her creed—a creed which set such things aside as mere dross beside the despotic will of Him who gave them. So in fear and trembling she taught herself hardly to wait His pleasure. He would give the sign—of a surety He would give the sign.

A sound of whimpering, and Flora's shrill, imperious voice recalled her to the reality of another struggle for a wedding garment, which ended in the pocketing of a brand-new shilling on Flora's part, and Kate's tearful return to chuckle over less valuable treasures in the corner.

"You might have left it to her, Flora," said

## THE BREATH OF SCANDAL

Kirsty, with a catch in her voice ; “ it isn’t much she is asking from anyone.”

Perhaps, as she went back to her loom, she thought that she herself had asked but little either all her life. And now she asked nothing save that she might be able to finish her web, or nearly finish it, before the Sacrament, so that in her mind she could justly put the price of it against that of the violet-sprigged wedding garment. For then she would be more at ease, since she would not, as it were, be obliged to think of it as having been paid for by the money she had got from Morrison the pedlar. That could then go into the general account of Peter’s shop—the general account of all things, and not into the great book. So much, and no more, she could dare to do before the Sacrament came round, with its Heaven-sent sign of fitness or unfitness.

Flora watched her bent figure begin work with the shuttle, and went back to her Bible discontentedly.

“ So Kate is to have a ribbon, and Kirsty wine, but there is nothing but hard words for sensible folk who tell truth. It is a wicked world.”

Mhairi Macinver echoed the sentiment when she returned to the manse from her visitation.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Her father, she said severely to the venerable old gentleman who sate shaking his head in kindly deprecation of her assertion, might very properly allude in his preparation sermons to the old bridle for gossips which still hung on the church wall, since never had she known the parish so troublesome, so full of scandal, so dissatisfied, and all about nothing—nothing, at any rate, which she could understand.

Hugh Macleod, one of those thick-set, red-white-and-black Celts who belong to Nature's own corps of pioneers, looked up gravely from the catalogues of farm machinery he was studying.

"But it is quite easy, Mhairi. It is the Land League that is doing it. And I don't wonder the people are dissatisfied. It strikes one strong when one has been away from it as I have, as I was telling Mr. Magnus to-day. He was down at Scarva, spying out the land, so he said, for local colour; for he writes a good deal, and he speaks well, too—I don't think I ever heard a man speak such fine Gaelic as he does——"

"Gaelic!" echoed Mhairi sharply. "But he has no Gaelic—at least, I never heard of it."

"Well, you would have heard him to-day with the best of us. They were fine and pleased with him, too, for he is one with a way of his own.



## THE BREATH OF SCANDAL

I was asking him to put in a good word for New Westray, but he said he was like the Scarva folk—the old was good enough for him.”

“He has been here long enough, whatever,” remarked Mhairi sternly, “just idling about like a wastrel. I can’t think what he is after.”

Hugh reverted to his machines placidly. “It will be Mrs. Macdonald——” he began.

“Hugh!” ejaculated his fiancée, horrified. “And she but six months a widow!”

Her lover shifted uneasily before her frown, knowing better than to dispute with her on the proprieties.

“Then perhaps he is a Land Leaguer himself; he knows enough about it, whatever,” he said diplomatically. “But if you were six days a widow, dear, I should be wanting to marry you—so I can’t be throwing stones.”

Mhairi smiled, and then became serious over a choice of churns, which necessitated her going to look over Hugh’s shoulder.



## CHAPTER XIV

### THE MARKET STANCE

THE germ of a scandal is like other germs : it requires time for incubation, the length of which depends entirely on the conditions in which it is placed. Now, Westray was in a state favourable to fermentation of all kinds, for the three great festivals of the island year were close at hand, each bringing its meed of excitement to the usual monotony of life. First, there was the cattle market—on which the comfort or discomfort of the whole year depended, since a bad price for your stirk meant a docking of small luxuries. Next, the yearly Communion—which in a way settled the chances of a whole eternity, with its arbitrary sorting out of sheep and goats. Finally, the feast of St. Grouse—the 12th of August bringing recognized opportunities for recouping the year's losses out of the pockets of Sassenach sportsmen. And this year the three events conjointly stirred the Little Westray folk to a clearer

## THE MARKET STANCE

perception of the injustice of their fate compared with that of their neighbours across the strand. To begin with, the list of communicants over the way—the tale of the elect—was not so large, and there could, therefore, be no question of Towers of Siloam in the fact that the cattle were in better case. Indeed, both the lack of Church members and the excess of fat were referable to the same cause—namely, a landlord who could afford to pay for his amusement and buy out the superfluous population. The very fact of his approaching arrival was making itself felt even now from one end to the other of the big island. The ghillies were furbishing up their kilts after nine months of trousers, and putting casks of beer and whisky in the gun-room; the schoolmistress was preparing her list of successful scholars for the annual prize-giving. Half the male population were at work on roads, boats, and nets; and every old wife in the township was saving eggs, fattening chickens, and knitting stockings. The folk of Little Westray felt, enviously, that this was as it should be. This meant capital, and in these cold, windy northern isles either landlord or tenant must be able to defy an inclement season or two. So it was a pity, indeed, that Mrs. Macdonald, who had no money at all, who could not even

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

employ labour—since she lived almost as poorly as they did themselves, and might be seen any day working in her own garden—would not give way to Mr. Begbie, who could and did. And it was more than a pity, it was a burning shame, that she should stand on her rights, as rumour said she intended to do, and evict the Scarva folk.

The talk, however, had gone no farther than this by market-day, so far as Magnus could find out, though he — having experience of such things—felt that the opinion of the people was gradually growing against Margaret ; so that he was not surprised at the sullen looks on more than one face as it watched the tall figure in black, which, despite the driving wind and rain, showed itself early at the market stance. He was not surprised, and yet these looks roused in him a fierce anger which fed on its own heat, for it made him resentful over his own wrath. He knew what that wrath meant—knew that the thought of her was stronger than the whole of his previous life, which he was ignoring for her sake. It had as yet been stronger even than his own conviction as to what was best for her, so that the past few days had passed aimlessly, idly, as before, though he had meant to take some

## THE MARKET STANCE

definite step. He told himself he was a fool, and then spent the day in watching her go the rounds of the beasts, and give a word of encouragement or congratulation to the owners. It was what the lairds of Westray had always done, and but for the wind and rain Ronald would have been beside her, in kilt and tartan, with the eagle's feather to his bonnet, as the chief of the Macdonalds should have. Even as it was, she had hesitated about bringing him, and talked of waterproofs till Tiny had put down her foot firmly. She, for one, was not going to tempt Providence, and it was a worse day than one in which she had lost "just a beautiful ostrich plume to her bonnet, and the man she had putten it on for had gone to his grave wi' dipthery." So Margaret was alone, tall, pale, sad ; for, though she had borne herself bravely towards Magnus regarding Peter Macfie's letter, it had hit her hard—so hard that Magnus, watching her, wondered and fumed at her looks.

The day remained hopelessly, miserably bad. The mist-wreaths sweeping towards the mainland from the Atlantic marched in battalions over the bare hillside, holding the stance solidly against love and lucre, greed and gaiety, till the very drovers shirked bargaining, and the lassies—

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

foregoing their chances of fairings—left the lads' arms to shelter their draggled finery as best they could behind boulders and umbrellas.

Mhairi Macinver, coming over as in duty bound in the afternoon, told Hugh Macleod that it would be a noisy market before nightfall, since the liquor booths at least kept out some of the bitter wind, and folk could scarcely be blamed for seeking what comfort they could find. The very cattle looked worse than they need, standing muddy, drooped, drenched, with hollow flanks and staring coats; and many a man standing beside his unsold stirk, losing even his hope of an offer as the hours went by, told himself that the potatoes were a short crop also, and loafed off for a dram in sheer despite, finding friends in misfortune, of course, ready to talk over grievances. It was not a question of rent—that, as a rule, sits lightly on all save the landlord nowadays—it was a question of subsistence. The time when Westray folk had lived on Westray harvests was long past. Now every grain of oatmeal eaten in the island had to be of the finest imported kind, and life was impossible without tea, loaf-bread, soda, and flour for scones, herrings for the potatoes—though limitless fish lay ready for the catching—and a host of other

## THE MARKET STANCE

things. Yet even a box of matches required money. Where was it to come from, since Westray soil could no more grow coin than it could grow corn? Yet, surely, Christian men and women had a right to matches in these latter days. And why should they eat home-grown oatmeal, with wheat-bread at fivepence a quarter? You might as well tell them to go on hunting seals, paying tithes of the St. Mary's cubs for church lighting as in old days, when paraffin from Batoum was to be had relatively cheaper at Peter Macfie's!

These questions, and many others, were roused inevitably by the sight of Margaret's figure, and Magnus, as the afternoon went on, more than once joined her for a time, with the result—as she did not fail to notice—that many faces softened to a smile of welcome.

"It is very bad, I'm afraid," she said suddenly, turning to him almost in appeal.

"Very bad for you," he replied curtly. "Why you came I can't think."

"Because we always come," she put in proudly. "We like to show the people that our interests——"

He laughed almost roughly. "My dear Mrs. Macdonald! There is such a thing as trying to

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

stem Niagara with a straw. Sympathy doesn't satisfy a starving stomach—it doesn't even stand against the almighty dollar nowadays. I don't say the spirit of the age is right or wrong, mind. I only state the fact. You live on the top of the steeple, and—would you mind standing aside, please? I don't think that man is quite sober——” His voice had softened as he stepped between her and the lurching figure which came towards them. “I suppose it is no use asking you to go home, but I wish you would. You do more harm than good—even from your own point of view—by remaining.”

She drew herself up sharply. “You mean that I am unpopular. Well, I suppose I am. I have not the knack of making people smile as—as you have. What then?”

“Everything, Mrs. Macdonald, to frail humanity, especially when it is getting drunk—as it is now.” He paused, then added deliberately: “And, apart from everything else, I have the greatest possible dislike to seeing any woman—especially one for whom I care as I care for you—within measurable distance of—of a brute like that.”

He pointed to Angus Mohr, who had just passed them, and something in his tone, his manner,



## THE MARKET STANCE

made her hesitate. He saw it with a sudden pulse of joy.

"You will go home," he said quickly. "Please !"

She drew back, flushing up hotly. "Thank you ; but—but I am not afraid. You do not understand—how can you ? I am not afraid of my own people."

She passed on as she spoke—leaving him without choice of following her—and walked quickly towards the straggling row of booths set out, despite the weather, with cheap jewellery and sweeties, where a few drenched couples were buying fairings, amongst them Red Dugald and Ishbel Mackenzie. Her finery was all bedraggled, her pretty face pale and tired ; but she had clung to her lover's arm tenaciously all day, and more than once had edged him away discreetly from the neighbourhood of her brother Angus. And now the sight of that lurching figure made her say hurriedly : "I don't want any more, Dugald ; we have enough sweets to last till we are married, and that's the truth."

She spoke coaxingly, and used her big eyes without stint ; but Dugald had been drinking also, as who should not who had got the top price of the market for his beast ? He was in



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

consequence full of blatant contempt for less fortunate people, especially for Angus, who had not sold his—Angus, who had contradicted him to his face—Angus, who came up to the sweetie booth imitating his order for a pound of cinnamon rock.

“Give me another pound, man,” he jeered, when Angus had laid down his pennies. “My measure for my jo is twice that of a man that is taking his stirk home, whatever.”

“Ye can take my pound to save time,” bawled Angus promptly, flinging his paper bag at Dugald’s head, and provoking a like return. Both missed, and Ishbel’s faint scream was drowned in the bystanders’ laugh as they scrambled for the spilt sweeties, and listened to the mutual abuse of the two disputants. It followed the usual course of half-drunken quarrels : from the immediate insults to the cause of it ; from Angus’s assertion that Dugald had lied about his beast to accusations of other lying ; so harking back to the laird’s coat, where they remained, full of assertion and denial, until Dugald found warranty for his version by citing Ishbel—Ishbel, who had told him everything—everything——

Angus gave a yell of rage. “Did she tell you that she gave him a kiss for the coat ?—hands off,

## THE MARKET STANCE

you fool ! I warned you to keep a still tongue. Did she say that ? Hands off, I say !”—for Ishbel had flung herself on him, and was vainly trying to stop his mouth. “ Ay ! you may well give the hussy sweets, Dugald ; but twenty pounds o’ them will not be so sweet as another man’s kisses—as the laird’s——”

“ It’s a lie—a lie !” panted the girl, still struggling. “ It was he who stole the coat, he who lied to me, and has now, because I know he stole the coat—stole the watch——”

Angus, tearing his hand away from her hold struck out at her blindly, and she fell back with a cry—with nothing save a faint mark on her cheek, however, since someone at the same moment laid hold of Angus from behind, and dragged him back by main force. It was Margaret, who pushed herself between the brother and sister, breathless with the exertion, but calm.

“ You coward !” she said, turning to Angus, her cultured, refined voice giving a strange decision to the Gaelic words. “ When she is new-risen from a death-sickness, too ! And what is my husband’s coat to you that you should quarrel over it ?”

In her imperious height and beauty, her bold scorn, she looked like one to command attention,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

and, to tell truth, in the very intensity of her single-minded determination to deal with her world as it should be dealt with, she felt like one. She felt her own claim to be heard, and expected, as it were, to stay the plague, to arrest, to control, briefly, to leave her mark on this baser clay. But she was mistaken, as most people are who interfere in such quarrels. Her interruption only made the babel slacken for a second, and there she was, helplessly hemmed in, as if she, too, had come to enjoy the spectacle of a drunken brawl.

“Angus! Dugald!” she cried passionately; “listen—I will have you listen!”

She might as well have spoken to the dead. Intent on their own trivial wrongs, the quarrellers set all else aside until suddenly Magnus’s voice on the outskirts was heard saying: “By Heaven! there is Mrs. Macdonald in the thick of it. Now then, good people, what the mischief are you up to? Jam their silly heads together, someone! Can’t you see they are afraid of each other? *Horo!* men of Westray, can you stand to see such a poor fight as that? I wouldn’t. Now then, Angus, have at him, man!” The last was spoken in the Gaelic, as Angus, propelled by a dexterous shove

## THE MARKET STANCE

from behind, was forced to close quarters, and hit out wildly, in sheer self-defence ; then, overbalancing, fell into his alarmed adversary's arms, upsetting him, amid a sudden roar of laughter. The next instant Margaret, with Magnus's arm round her, found herself right-about-faced, quick-marched out of the hurly-burly.

"Now, perhaps, you will go home," said her protector resentfully, still in his excitement speaking in Gaelic. "I should think even you were sick of it."

It was years since she had been so taken to task in that language—not since her brother's death, and the memories it roused held her silent for a second, her face soft ; then she drew back.

"But I want to tell them—I want them to understand," she began.

"It is not understanding any but the policeman they will be to-night," said Mhairi Macinver, who had come hurrying up curiously, "and to-morrow they will have forgotten ; so you must not be minding what they say, dear Mrs. Macdonald."

"Minding !" echoed Margaret, keenly alive in a moment to the curiosity on the girl's face and on others' while standing by listening. "Why should I mind ? That is what I wanted to make them understand. I want everyone to under-

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

stand that I do not care an atom what they think——”

“Except that they should think you *do* care,” interrupted Magnus hastily. “And you can leave Miss Macinver to explain that—she understands their gossip better than you do.”

There was a suspicion of innuendo in his tone, and Mhairi flushed up. “It is understanding them better than any you are yourself, Mr. Magnus, and speaking better Gaelic, too.”

The fact seemed to come home to Margaret for the first time, and she turned quickly to Magnus. “Yes,” she said reproachfully, “I did not know——”

“How could you, when I did not know myself till I came to the Clachan?” he answered impatiently. “I will tell you about it as we go home, if you will only be sensible, and leave your world to Miss Macinver and the policeman.”

He drew her hand through his arm as he spoke, and the sense of kindly coercion came once more to make her face soft.

“I don’t suppose I can do anything else,” she said regretfully.

“No, thank Heaven!” replied Magnus, with a laugh.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

SHE had done quite enough as it was, however, to disturb the peace of the whole island, for, though some folk chose to believe Ishbel, some Angus, some Dugald, all were agreed that it was wondrous strange Mistress Macdonald should care so little for truth that she should not even make inquiries. Now that the laird's coat was a topic of general discussion, the consensus of opinion was that he had not gone down to his death in it, in which case someone must have it. If this was Mistress Macdonald, the right person, why did she not say so and end gossip? If she had not, why did she not endeavour to find out the thief? To begin with, there had been a gold watch and chain in it for certain, even if Peter's tale of the deed was not true; though, to be sure, if it were, it might account for—well, for a good many things.

To tell truth, even Magnus himself, though he

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

knew the lengths to which Margaret's pride could lead her, felt balked by her curt refusal to consider his advice. She was willing, she said, to be judged, not by her acts, which no one knew, but by her opinions, which she did not conceal. If people, therefore, talked, let them talk. They could say nothing of her which her opinions did not warrant, and she was not ashamed of them. To clear her character would be to stultify herself, and she would be obliged by his ceasing to refer to the matter.

So the temporal excitement of the market passed, and the spiritual fervour of Sacrament week came to make folk more ready than ever to give judgment; and still Margaret went on her way unheeding. In a vague way it began to be considered an open scandal, and people wondered if she would behave as usual on the great day, when the table of the Lord would be spread in the wilderness for the elect—only for the elect.

The question was in the mouths of many and the hearts of more when, as usual, they rose with the dawn to prepare themselves for the tramp of many miles over hill and dale which lay between them and the congregation. Magnus had no excuse of this sort for being out of bed before



## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

daylight, but he was one of those irregular people who hold that humanity loses by being slave to sun, moon, and stars, and by eating, drinking, sleeping, according to their pleasure. Besides, since it was the fashion in the Outer Hebrides to rise early on Communion Sunday, he elected to go through the whole experience conscientiously, so as to be sure of what he annoyed Margaret by calling "atmosphere."

So he watched the dawn come like mother-of-pearl behind the dim grey waves of the mainland hills, which looked scarcely more shadowy than the waving grey hue of the sea westward; for he was lounging in a sand-bunker on the point beyond Westray House, whence he could see east, and west see—strange pathetic feature in these high northern lands and seas—the one faint shadow, with the light of coming day behind it, and the other shadow still showing against the lingering glimmer of the day that was dead. They were curiously alike, these two, he thought, yet curiously distinct; for as the light grew, the one shadow darkened into steadfast form, the other melted into motion, until, as the first sun-ray hung on the hill-crest like a star, the fiat seemed to go forth dividing the earth from the waters—dividing the little island from the big—



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

dividing each man from his fellow. As he looked out over the strand, which at the half-tide showed like a bay fringed deep with rows of seaweed, he could see prowling along them a woman's figure—Kate-gorach's, no doubt. He was too far to be certain, but the sight suggested something else to him, which made him take an envelope from his pocket and begin to scribble in Gaelic. And as he scribbled he hummed a Gaelic tune, with the beat of a wave in it :—

“ Oh, what do you see, Marg'ret, what do you see,  
Out where the wave-breasts beat on the sky ?  
Is it Love that you see, Marg'ret, Love without me—  
Love of a far world when my love is nigh ?

“ I'm here in my boat, Marg'ret, on the wave's breast,  
I've drifted all night, dear, to watch o'er thy rest ;  
So my kisses shall meet thee, Marg'ret, at dawn,  
On the mouth of the day, dear, the lips of the morn.

“ Oh, what have you found, Marg'ret, what have you found,  
Down where the sea's voice whispers the land ?  
Is it somebody's heart, Marg'ret, pulseless and drowned—  
The heart of the dead when my heart's in your hand ?

“ Oh, what do you feel, Marg'ret, what do you feel  
When sea-waves and land-waves murmur and meet ?  
Is Heaven your thought, Marg'ret—Heaven, while I kneel,  
Finding a paradise, dear, at thy feet ?

“ I'm here in my boat, Marg'ret, waiting for thee,  
As the body of land waits the soul of the sea ;  
As the hearts of the dead wait the trump from above,  
As the heart of a man waits the heart of his love,  
As the mouth of the day waits the lips of the morn,  
Awake from thy dreams, dear, and come with the dawn.”

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

His song ended in a laugh. "Do for a comic opera," he murmured, half bitterly. "Tenor on the stage alone—preferably in tights—scene-painter in the slips watching his own sun rise. I might get five pounds for it, and——" He rose suddenly, crushed the envelope in his hand, and flung it into the sea, where it bobbed about on the faint ripple like a cockle-shell. If he could only throw his love for Margaret away as easily, he thought, as he limped back along the shore—for he was still somewhat lame—it would be better. But he could neither fling it aside nor cherish it, because he knew quite well that if, for instance, she were to accept his invitation and come with the dawn, there would be the devil to pay!

He flushed up suddenly like a girl, and stood transfixed, for there she was before him coming hastily round a spur of rock which jutted into the sand just below Westray House. She was coming from the strand, evidently, so that the figure he had seen must have been hers, not *Kate-gorach's*. But what on earth was she doing on the strand at that hour in the morning? His wonder must have showed on his face, for, after belying her heightened colour and evident surprise at meeting him by a cool greeting, she paused, then said defiantly: "It was a high

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

spring-tide last night, and I always fancy that something——” She broke off, to look seaward, with a quiver of her lip.

“*Oh, what have you found, Marg’ret?*”

The coincidence of his song struck him, and her sudden confidence—no rare thing of late—made his voice softer than ever.

“And you pretend you do not care—you who wander about seeking a message from the dead, like *Kate-gorach*, and——” He paused in his turn, puzzled by her sudden pallor.

“Yes, like Kate. I see her often down there. What then?”

“I did not mean to even you to the parish idiot, Mrs. Macdonald,” he said, with a smile, “yet I think you nearly as foolish. You—pardon me—don’t need a message; you know what the dead wanted quite well.”

Her face hardened. “I have told you I don’t believe that story; and I told Evan the same. I will not believe it till I see the proof with my own eyes.”

“Then I hope you may,” he replied quietly; “or, rather, I hope that you may find something—I don’t care much what it is—that will make you think of other things besides keeping West-ray.”

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

She stood frowning slightly, her face in the dawn showing anxious and haggard.

"Did I tell you Evan was coming with the Begbies on Monday—that is, to-morrow?" she said suddenly, with another return to confidence. "He—he is going to inquire. I—I cannot stop him, of course, but it is hard."

"You make it hard for yourself," he said gently—"hard in all things—you are utterly weary and done now, it is no use denying it—yet you will go and face all those idiots. Great heavens!" he went on suddenly; "if I could make you find something—now—here in the dawn—I wonder if I could." His face lit up. He stretched his hands towards her, but she moved on hastily.

"I am not going to stay at home because people choose to be foolish, if that is what you mean," she replied. "Good-bye; I shall see you later, I suppose; and I shall be glad when it is over. I admit so much."

Others in Westray admitted it also. To begin with, Ishbel Mackenzie—who knew that it would be impossible to keep her quarrel with Dugald, which had followed on Angus Mohr's story, quiet any longer. For, as recognized lovers, he and she ought to sit in the congregation behind one

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

boulder ; nor could she hope to brazen out his sitting apart, since all the new sailor-hats and lace collars in the world would not prevent her face showing pale, her eyes red. Angus, too, though his story had many followers—especially among the younger women, who were jealous of Ishbel—felt nervous. His wife was a Church member, and it was conceivable that some enemy might make a public scandal about her belonging to the household of a reputed thief. They did such things among the Seceders, and, though the Kirk was more tolerant, feeling was running high in the island. Besides, there were other offences of wrecking to drag up ; so Dugald hardly knew whether to be defiant or decorous—whether to keep his black eye quiet or blazon it abroad, and so put Ishbel to shame.

But it was in the hovel where *Kate-gorach* went in and out with dead men's treasures that the Communion dawn brought most dread. Flora was in two minds as to the wisdom of having confiscated Miss Mhairi's bright new shilling ; it brought her, on this day of days, some qualms of conscience which she would rather have been without, the more so because poor Kate had kept her awake half the night by whimpering amid her rags like a frightened child. Flora had thought

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

herself justified before in leaving the fool without some scrap of finery to show her better than the beasts which perish, but at the last moment, like all small tyrants, she had lost backbone, and had absolutely risen earlier than usual to search in her kist for something to present to the idiot. But Kate had already disappeared to the strand, whence, as her keeper very well knew, she was not likely to return till long after the start must be made towards the congregation. So the beautiful tartan kerchief was little good as a salve to conscience, and none as an averter of vengeance from Miss Mhairi. Flora consequently felt aggrieved.

But in the other compartment, where poor old Kirsty sate ready dressed in her violet-sprigged gown, with her bonnet, waiting to be put on, beside her black gloves, and the worn Bible folded in a clean white handkerchief, there was no sense of injustice in the dread, no touch of comedy in the tragedy. Kirsty could not even think. Where was the use, when there was Someone to out-think her—Someone whose day of acceptance or denial this was to be? Even the talk which of late she could not fail to hear about the laird's coat, the laird's watch and chain, did not seem to affect the question to her simple

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

mind. What did it matter who had stolen the watch, or from whom it had been taken, when there was Someone to decide the great question as to whether *Kate-gorach* had been sent of heaven or hell—Someone to give the unerring signal of grace or damnation? So she sate very pale, very quiet, though when the time came to start she could scarcely tie her beautiful violet bonnet-strings. She was one of the earliest afoot in the township, partly because her feebleness required time, partly because she wished to be alone. Flora, of course, would sit next her at the table, as she had done ever since they joined the feast, but till then she wanted solitude.

The mother-o'-pearl dawn had made no rash promise for the day; it was heavenly bright, heavenly clear—a day giving an almost incredible brilliance to that barren northern land, that cold northern sea; covering the one with royal robes of purple heather edged with golden seaweed, decking the other in sapphires and diamonds. A little cool wind set the bog-cotton tassels a-swinging, while, hanging between the cloudless blue of the sky and the waveless blue of the sea, the gannets were fishing busily, falling with a swoop of white wings into the blue below, rising again in pillars of white spray to the blue above.



## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

But Kirsty trudged along, her hands clasped over her worn Bible, seeing none of those things; though, Heaven knows, the New Jerusalem of her thoughts could scarcely have been more fair. So, as the day grew and the sun climbed up and up, groups of men, women, and children, also on the way, overtook and passed her. Yet few looked more frail than old Kirsty, tramping along the road to salvation. And now, nearing the central bit of moor which from time immemorial had been consecrated to the Lord's table, you could see folk converging on it from all quarters. Every cottage was in a stir of preparation, and in the manse Mhairi Macinver, who had been up since dawn, providing breakfast for the bevy of black coats come from neighbouring parishes to help her father, was packing up baskets on baskets of things necessary for the strange function, half service, half picnic, which—in surviving the primitive habits which gave rise to it—has lost so much of its impressiveness.

So thought Magnus, when, purposely late, he caught his first glimpse of the well-dressed multitude camped out irregularly on the moorland, and seeking what shade they could from the blazing sun behind rocks, tilted carts, and umbrellas. It was horribly like a photographic group,



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

detestably commonplace. He slipped into a vacant tussock of heather behind the rock, where Margaret, with the little laird—duly dressed in the kilt, eagle's feathers and all—was sitting, and felt inclined to wish he had not come. And then he forgot his disappointment—forgot even the terrible Punch-and-Judy canvas pulpit. He forgot all this, in something which struck him instantly as unforgettable. It was only a long, irregular, white table formed out of many smaller ones covered with sheets, and hidden, half its height, by the purple heather in which it stood.

So that was the Table in the Wilderness !

And those benches draped in white around it were the Seats of the Elect !

Emotional, impulsive, he sat staring at it, half hypnotized by the dazzle of it, gladly conscious that Margaret was looking at it also. She had not an umbrella between her and it, to save her eyes from the glare, like most of the congregation. And yet, no doubt, they were fulfilled with grace ; better, in a way, than she was, or he was. It was only the difference of temperament. And there, down in the semicircle of the unco' serious, ranged round that horrible pulpit, was a face with the thrill in it also—an old woman's face. There were tears coursing down the cheeks of

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

many in that row of the elect, but those old eyes seemed too strained for such relief. And so, idly, he sate, wondering in turn what each face came out into the wilderness for to see—Peter Macfie's, complacent above a velvet waistcoat, important beneath a tall silk hat ; Angus Mohr's, sullen, half hidden behind a tilted cart ; Mhairi Macinver's judging—even as she took part in it—how the function was going off. And Margaret's ?

A whole tonic sol-fa of cultured precision, rising from a group of young men and maidens picnicking in pairs among the heather, a psalm-book to every couple, ended the first portion of the service, and sent him to stand beside the tall figure in black during the short interval allowed for arrangement and refreshment, in the hope of diverting her attention.

“ It is a fine sight,” he said, “ and I'm glad I have seen it. I suppose every soul in the island is here ?”

“ Nearly,” she said indifferently. “ There are not many Free Kirkers or Seceders. But, of course, there are a few sick and old people. Still, everyone who could has come, I think—except *Kate-gorach*. She is generally very much to the fore, poor soul ! but I haven't seen her to-day.”

“ There she is now,” said Magnus, pointing to

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

an unmistakable figure coming down the road, mincing, bobbing, sidling, evidently quite pleased with herself. They were arranging the tables by this time, and Peter the elder was fussing about, as the first guests went forward to take their seats.

“Have a hold of my hand, Kirsty ; you look real bad,” whispered Flora, as her neighbour stumbled in the knee-deep heather. So, hand in hand, the two old things, who had been girls together, went on. And Kate, the fool, mincing and babbling, came on also.

“What a sight she has made of herself !” continued Magnus, still intent on distraction—on anything to pass the time. “What has she got on ? A man’s coat, surely ?—a blue serge coat !” He paused with a start, for Margaret had left his side, and was on her way to meet that advancing figure, which, as it passed the outlying groups of worshippers, nodded and beckoned in answer to their smiles—on her way swiftly, her face pale, her eyes flashing, a sudden resentful defiance in her look. And then her voice came clear above the faint stir, the faint sound of feet going towards the table, making them pause.

“It is the laird’s coat. It is my husband’s coat. How did you get it, Kate ? and what is there in it ?”

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

Her own words seemed to excite her. The quick murmur of "The laird's coat ! the laird's coat !" rising on all sides, seemed to give her the clue, as it were, to the situation ; and she turned for a second to the startled faces gathering in on her in accusing triumph. "Now we shall see—now you shall see !" Her long slim fingers were in the pockets, searching them swiftly, and Magnus's heart leapt to his mouth. What was there indeed ; and what would she do ? Well, let her do it—this also was a sight to see : an unforgettable sight—this woman instinct with vitality and purpose.

"Nothing !"

The word rang out regretfully, it seemed to him.

"Nothing but these !" She held up such oddments as are to be found in most men's pockets, trivial—pathetically trivial here—as were the shells and seaweeds telling of the poor fool's hand. "Then who has his watch and chain ?" went on her voice, gaining a sudden note of accusation. "You were ready enough to think I stole the deed ; who has the watch and chain ? Kate ! who has the watch and chain ?"

In the strange silence of shame and surprise which held the spectators her words echoed clear

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

through the bright, sunny air—clear over the royal robe of purple heather through which an old woman in a violet-sprigged wedding-garment was stumbling to reach the white seats of the elect. But she failed, for even her outstretched hand, as she fell forward, did not reach them.

“Kirsty!” cried Flora on her knees beside her; “what is it? Get up, dear, and take your seat beside me.”

But she lay still, and so the cry came—breaking in on that other excitement—for Dr. Gilchrist.

“Take the poor old soul away,” he said in an undertone to Margaret, who came also. “I’m afraid it is all over, but there is no use saying so here and having a fuss. It is a stroke, Mr. Macinver,” he added aloud. “I don’t wonder; she has been looking like it this while past. We must get her home at once. If you could spare us a table, it would be the best way of carrying her.”

So Angus and Dugald, who, despite being foes, were yet the nearest relatives, carried old Kirsty shoulder-high over the moor, as being the shortest way, and Flora, forgoing the feast, held fast amid her sobs to one corner of the tablecloth with which Miss Mhairi had screened the set face from the sun.

## THE TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

And as they went through the royal robe of purple the words of the thirty-fifth paraphrase, as it was sung lustily by the congregation, floated after them :

“To cleanse the soul in sin that lies.”

But Kirsty's ears were closed in death, and in life her creed had been a sterner one.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A MESSAGE

THE long, bright day, which in its prime of sun showed forth *Kate-gorach's* strange wedding-garment, had come to its close. The sun had dipped beneath the sea, taking with it the gold flakes from the little rippling waves, the crimson flush from the sky, leaving it yellow and pellucid, as it had been at dawn. It had been a perfect day, Magnus told himself, as he stood by the window at Westray House—a fitting day to close the semi-sentimental interlude of the past few months, which, in its romantic unreality, its hint of something beyond the eternal humdrum all-fours of life, had held his imaginative nature at bay against his common sense. He felt a little hurt and sore both towards himself and Margaret ; for now the last faint flavour of romance, the last hint of fancy, was gone from the situation. The deed would never turn up now. The laird would never come back again, as it were,

## A MESSAGE

to put his finger in the pie of life. That was clear, since the deed, if it had been in the laird's pocket when—according to Angus's and Ishbel's admission in their first surprise and relief—he took off his coat to put on the oilskin, would have been there still ; for nothing known to have been in his pocket was missing, save the watch and chain, and for that Kate's tearful protests and the discovery of two more pound notes in Kirsty's kist fully accounted. Evidently the coat had been hidden until Flora's refusal to give Kate any finery made her produce it as a wedding-garment.

So that ended a possibility, and Magnus felt vexed, not because he cared in the least for anything, save for the effect which a message from the dead might have had on Margaret, though probably, he told himself, it would have had none.

He turned to look at her, as, in the fading light, she sate emptying the pockets of the blue serge coat before folding it up.

“So that ends it,” he said suddenly. “I shall not have to punch Peter's head ; and so, ‘Othello's occupation’ being gone, I must seek another, I suppose.”

She glanced up at him, then went on with her work.



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“For all that,” she replied obstinately, “Peter has as much to go upon as ever. Who knows if I did not find the deed before? Who knows that I have not done—what I said I would do? Not even you can know that, and I am glad of it. It is my affair, not other people’s.”

She spoke almost vehemently, and Magnus, who had been with her most of the day, helping her in her inquiries, noticed, as he had noticed more than once before, a suspicion of tears in her voice. What wonder? he asked himself angrily. And yet Margaret, asking herself the same question, felt that she did not know—even granted the strain and worry of the day—why her lips trembled, or why, when Fate had declared for her, she should feel a self-pity, a vague disappointment. Had she been all unconsciously hoping for another dénouement, or was she only weary?

“I’m afraid I can’t credit you with the crime,” said Magnus rather impatiently, as he came away from the window. “You aren’t human enough for it, Mrs. Macdonald, and that’s the fact. I wish you were. As it is——” He paused, standing beside her, his quick eye, his quicker sympathy, caught by the triviality of what she was laying aside—the almost pathetic triviality of the bits of string, the crumpled paper or two,

## A MESSAGE

the pipes, matchboxes, odd scraps of all sorts, mixed up, as they were, with the seaweeds and shells which poor Kate had added to them. It would be difficult to say, he thought idly, which hand had garnered some of the treasures—a man's or a fool's ; though, to be sure, the terms were occasionally synonymous. Witness himself for having let this obstinate woman keep him from realities so long.

“ No, Mrs. Macdonald,” he went on cynically. “ If you could commit an honest crime—falling in love might do—there would be some hope of your seeing reason. But I have none now—just as I've no hope of that message from the dead, which might, or might not, have induced you to reconsider facts.” He paused, and, after his custom, escaped from his own feelings by a jest : “ Unless, indeed, one of those ”—he pointed to the crumpled papers—“ were to contain ‘ *Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin !* ’ I wish it did ! I wish I had had the chance of being allowed prophetic curses ! You would burn them, I suppose ? Well, I have some matches. Let me see you commit the crime—if you can.”

Her colour had risen hotly at his first words, and now, with a defiant shrug of the shoulders, she drew the nearest paper to her.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“It is probably a bill,” she said coldly, smoothing it out. “No! it is only an envelope, addressed ‘J. Knyvett.’ Why, it is in your handwriting, and there is something written on the back!” She stood up, trembling with anger. “I suppose this is a joke—that you put it there—that you——”

“I did not,” interrupted Magnus sharply, then stood silent, staring at the envelope on which he had scribbled his song that morning. “I did not even intend you to see it, though I wrote it just before you met me on the strand. I threw it into the sea, and Kate-*gorach* must have picked it up.” He spoke as if arguing the matter out to himself, and, turning from her, walked back to the window. “It is a strange chance,” he added, without looking at her. “So I should like you to read it, please—to read it, if you can, as a message. Let me light the candle for you; it grows dark, and—and you may want to burn it, you know.”

His voice, soft with a tender raillery, yet vibrating with sudden passion, thrilled her ears, and the sight of his vivid face, the very closeness of his eager hands, as swiftly, certainly, they lit the taper which stood on the table beside her, seemed to invade her reserve, claiming her body

## A MESSAGE

and soul. She drew back with a faint sob, a sort of terror at her own bewilderment, her own causeless trouble.

"Thanks," she said, striving to keep her voice steady ; " but I will burn it unread. You said it was not meant for me to see."

She held the paper to the flame boldly enough, but her hand shook, keeping time to the throb of her heart. She saw it, and knew from his face that he saw it also, as, with his eyes on her, he pushed the candle closer to aid her task.

" It's a bit damp, I'm afraid," he remarked in quite a matter-of-fact tone. " That is from having been in the sea. You will almost have to read it before it burns, or perhaps you would like me to burn it for you."

The comprehension of his eyes made her inclined to fling the paper away and escape like a bashful girl ; but her pride forbade that she should even turn her eyes away. So, as the flame crept slowly up the paper, she watched it claim the song word by word :

" What have you found, Marg'ret ?  
Is it a heart, Marg'ret ?"

The question dazed her, blinded her. Was it that, truly ? After all these years—after wife-

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

hood, motherhood—had she found her heart at last ?”

“You will burn your fingers,” came the voice which had so suddenly gained the power to bewilder her. “And there is Ronald wanting you to say good-night to him. Give it me, or blow it out.”

But Ronald, throned in Tiny’s arms, had seen from the door what was going on, and put in his privileged claim. “Lem’mee blow it out, mummie ! Oh, lem’mee, please !”

“Lordsakes !” ejaculated Tiny, struggling as she advanced to keep the little nightgowned figure in reasonable control. “Was there ever sic’ a Shadrach-Meshach-and-Abednego-o’-a-bairn to be no feared o’ fire ? Ha’ud still, my lammie, an’ ye sall fuff oot as mony candles as there were in the laird o’ Grant’s house. That s’all you, and your mummaw and Mr. Magnus s’all clap handies at it, too.”

They did not, however. They only stood and looked while the little white face, set round with the red-gold curls, came between them and blew out candle and paper with one vigorous puff. The action seemed to rouse some memory in the childish brain, for the

## A MESSAGE

little arms stretched themselves out quickly to Magnus.

“I want a’hear about a twinkle-’tar that was fuffed out—tem’me, pleasth.”

“I promised to tell him a story about the lighthouse some day, Mrs. Macdonald,” explained Magnus, taking the child from Tiny, who, yielding her charge with the muttered remark that there was a “pair o’ them that would have to tak’ tent o’ fires that be not squenched,” left the room. Margaret did not move. She stood beside the charred scrap of paper which remained, looking at the man by the window, with the child in his arms outlined against the gold of the sky.

“It isn’t much of a story, Ronald,” came the musical voice, “and I seem to have forgotten the one I meant to tell you. But I’ll tell you another that has just come into my head——”

“Does it hurt awful?” interrupted Ronald categorically. “Does it bleege?”

“No, it burns.”

“Does it shiv’vel and cw’ackle and spit like a poo-cat?” went on the small inquisitor.

“It does everything dreadful, so listen and keep a sharp lookout for the twinkle-star—you’ll see it in a minute.” The voice paused, and then

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

went on, with a faint hesitation at first, which lessened at every word.

“It was a ship a-driftin’;  
It was a night o’ mirk;  
It was a quicksand shiftin’;  
And a lighthouse by the kirk.

“A woman watch was makin’,  
To guide her sailor hame;  
But glint or glim she’s lackin’  
To set the light aflame.

“‘Oh, Fire o’ God!’ she’s wailin’,  
‘Licht up yon lamp for me;’  
But through the mirk a-sailin’  
The ship nae star could see.

“She’s stripped her claes richt bauldly,  
An’ piled them in a pile.  
The wild wind clipped her cauldly,  
But ne’er a grew could wile.

“‘Oh, Fire o’ God!’ she’s pleadin’,  
‘Come burn the claes o’ me!’  
But ne’er a glint for heedn’  
Cam’ thro’ the mirk at sea.

“She’s plucked her long hair gladly  
Frae off her gowden pow,  
Her saft hands wounded sadly  
In twirling into tow.

“‘Oh, Fire o’ God!’ she’s shoutin’,  
‘Come burn the hair o’ me!’  
But ne’er a glint fo’ doubtin’  
Cam’ to the ship at sea.

“She’s torn her heart oot fairly,  
An’ let the red bluid drain;  
She’s set it down sae squarely,  
Empty o’ all but pain.

## A MESSAGE

“‘Oh, Fire o’ God!’ she’s claimin’,  
‘Come burn the heart o’ me!’  
An’ the gift o’ God went flamin’  
Far through the mirk at sea,

“For the licht o’ love——”

“Twinkle ’tar! There’s a twinkle ’tar. Oh, mummie! look at a twinkle ’tar!” cried Ronald.

She was standing close behind the two, her face white and set.

“It is time for you to go to bed, Ronald,” she said, almost sternly. “Say thank you to Mr. Magnus for his story, and good-night. Perhaps I had better say it, too,” she added, as she took the child. “Ronald may keep me—he is apt to be wakeful after—after listening to your stories.”

There was the least tremor of appeal even in her calm. Magnus respected it, though his heart was beating too, and the passion in him, raised by the knowledge that he had come close to her, craved the satisfaction of forcing her to face the truth that she had found her heart.

“Good-night,” he said briefly; “I have been here too long already. Good-night, Ronald. Remember you and your mother are coming for a sail to-morrow afternoon. Three o’clock, Mrs. Macdonald; the yacht will be standing in, they



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

think, before then, so you can board her, see your brother-in-law, and be back by tea-time." He could not resist this hold upon the future, even if he yielded the present; and Margaret flushed faintly at the implied claim. Still, the delay was a relief, for she must face this strange betrayal of herself by herself; must count the cost of this strange thrill in the life which had hitherto been so full of mere content. But this—this was happiness!

When Ronald had fallen asleep, she went down again to the empty room, and sat for a long time in the growing dark, watching the sky pass from topaz to pearl, from pearl to palest amethyst. And then she went up to bed, discreetly, soberly, to say her prayers, as usual, beside the boy's cot. And she slept peacefully; slept with one hand upon the plaid of Macdonald tartan, beneath which she had rested all her life.

But the other—the one with her wedding-ring still on it—was tucked under the pillow, holding something.

Only a scrap of charred paper, with a few words still visible upon it:

"Awake from thy dreams, dear, and——"

And what?

She did not know.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE BLACK PAMPHLET

NATURALLY enough, the finding of the laird's coat was a disappointment to many. To begin with, it is always a grievance to find a legitimately exciting topic nipped away from conversation, and relegated to sheer gossip. And then the actual discovery had had a distinct flavour of dramatic reprobation about it. The congregation looked at each other when service was over, trying doubtfully to recall their individual part in the suspicions which had so evidently been snubbed by Superior Wisdom. What had they said ? Something, perchance, which might warrant their neighbour in thinking that the finger of Providence pointed specially towards them.

And so, as it drifted homeward over moor and bog, poor human nature sought and found excuse for itself by slurring over the past grievance against Mrs. Macdonald, and shaking its head

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

gravely over the one that remained. Of course, it admitted, if Peter's tale was unfounded—as it appeared to be—and there never had been a deed of sale in the laird's pocket, Mrs. Macdonald was within her right in keeping the island ; but that was a very different thing from evicting honest people because she could not afford to make their houses habitable—habitable for Christians whose children went to a board-school and learnt French—at least, Ian Macleod's boy, who was in Standard Ex-VI., had learnt French, even though he was nothing but a herd as yet. But, then, the Macleods were aye clever a lot ; witness Hugh, the tacksman's son, come back a gentleman. Would the Scarva folk be wise to take his offer ? Ay ! but not on compulsion—not with the roof-tree stripped from above their heads !

So many an eye on its homeward way turned aggrievedly, sympathetically, to the miserable cluster of hovels visible on Scarva Point, wondering if, indeed, it would be desolate ere winter. Peter Macfie, however, who felt bitterly that his blatant charity of speech towards Margaret was so much waste material—since what was the use of expressing Christian forbearance when it was merited ?—put more venom into his remarks. For he was quite willing to admit, in speaking

## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

to Hugh Macleod, that nothing short of eviction would make the Scarva folk stand on their own feet, though, in conversation with the bank agent, he hinted darkly that if Mistress Macdonald was to remain in control, it was time the District Board looked to doing its duty.

Hugh Macleod himself, talking over the position with Mhairi, said frankly that he meant to use all his influence towards eviction. "Mrs. Macdonald," he said, "could not well be more unpopular than she is now, and if she would only let me manage the business, I'd engage they would write her a letter of thanks within a year ! But it should be done sharp—no notice—no time for fuss. I would have a steamer ready to take the lot to Glasgow, and I would like to start them off at least a fortnight before we left. The warrant, you see, would only have to be out in force, and once the roofs were off and there was only a choice between my offer and the hill-side, I believe I should bag the lot. I'd rather have them than strangers, but I must have someone, so I can't afford to hang on much longer. I think I'll go down to Scarva again to-morrow, and have another shy at the fools. Dugald seemed to waver last time, because he is the only man I suppose she *can't* turn out—he is

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

a crofter, not a cottar. If he would only make up his quarrel with Ishbel, I believe he'd set a good example."

Mhairi walked on with a smile of pity. "As if he had any right to quarrel, whatever! As if it was news she was a wild lass; as if a man could be troth-plight to a girl for three years, and not know the sort she is, unless he is a ninny. And Dugald is not that, so I will be talking to him myself, and to her, too."

Which she did, meeting Red Dugald's sullen assertions of general untrustworthiness with home truths regarding certain misdemeanours of his now in the past, and mingling her rebukes of Ishbel's wickedness with sound, worldly advice.

"Of course, it was coming to harm we all knew you would be, Ishbel, and it is worse before you there will be if you do not amend. And whether Angus tells truth or not, it is a disgrace to my father's parish for a brother to say such things of a sister. So the best for all is for you to marry Dugald, who is no better than he should be himself, and does not deserve to be cockered up by seeing you cry your eyes out for him. If you weep enough over your own fault, you will have none to spare for such trifles, and he will come round all the sooner."

## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

But as she walked home with Hugh again, she admitted she did not seem to have made much impression on either ; and Hugh, with a frown, said he felt inclined to give up the job. They had got an idea, he said, that Mr. Macdonald, the co-trustee, would veto the eviction. Let them see, that was all ! For it would cause a row, get talked of through the country, and make Mrs. Macdonald's position almost untenable, which was exactly what Evan wanted. Then, with the General Election coming on, political capital of that sort was invaluable. In fact, the Scarva cottars would be offered up as a sacrifice even by the Land League. And small blame ! Palpably there was something wrong in a system which forced free-born subjects to go over the seas like convicts. Mrs. Macdonald herself would allow that.

She was allowing it, as it so happened, at that very moment—allowing it with less effort, with fewer frowns, than she had thought possible. Though frowns always came hardly to her when she sate, as now, in the stern of a sailing-boat, watching the canvas thrill to the wind's touch, watching the cleft waves shudder along the thwarts with a cold hiss like the indraw of a shivering breath. And to-day there was some-

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

thing superadded even to this. She did not ask herself what it was ; she did not dare to ask. The answer would mean definition, and after her calm, dreamless night, she had risen with that vague shrinking from set form which comes to all great joy or sorrow. Nor did Magnus, full though he was of that imperious intention of making her face her own discovery, force it on her at first. He would wait, he told himself, till they went back together to the quaint, square garden which suited her so well. Then he would tell her that if she would only marry him, he would give up everything for her sake. After all, what more could a man want save to marry the woman he loved, and drift with her in a boat ?—to perdition, if need be ! So, at least, he told himself, as, his quick, emotional nature vibrating to every touch of beauty, kindness, pathos around him, he sate watching her figure outlined against the background of blue sea and blue sky, divided by the sunlit bar of Scarva Point. Yes ! he would chuck what Knyvett was pleased to call his career, spend his paltry hundreds a year on repairing the Scarva houses, use his voice in persuading the people to be slaves, and in telling stories to Ronald. What more could a man want ?

“ It always looks so snug,” he said, pointing to



## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

the cluster of huts nestled in the hollow, streaked through its middle with a white burn.

"It might be made so," replied Margaret slowly, almost wistfully, "if I had the money."

"You would waste it, I suppose. I dare say I should also." He paused, and then, as so often happened to his vagrant mind, he laughed at himself. "To think I should be such a fool—as if anything could make Scarva a sound concern! It is a deadlock."

"It ought not to be," put in Margaret hastily.

"'Ought not' isn't practical politics," he replied lightly. "It *is* a deadlock. Why should you give up what you think are sacred rights in the soil? Why should they give up theirs?"

"They haven't any."

"They think they have—as you do."

"And whose fault is that?" she said passionately. "Whose but the people who tell them they have—who won't let them be peaceful and contented, who rake up everything they can to set them against the landlord, like that man who wrote the Black Pamphlet did? I don't know who he was, but——"

"I have no doubt he was an honest man," interrupted Magnus quickly. "Truth has an ugly habit of having many faces, Mrs. Mac-



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

donald. But, see !” he continued, pointing to a fine thread of smoke westward ; “ there’s the yacht at last.”

He paused, looked at her rather queerly, and then veered the rudder, making the boat shoot—with a swift bend to the fuller wind—right into the gold and glitter of the west, right away from that faint streak of smoke.

“ Don’t let us go to the yacht,” he said. “ You can see your brother to-morrow, or I’ll take a note round to the big island afterwards. It is wicked to waste this wind in beating up to civilization when we have a following breeze to Avilion. Come ! we shall be half over to America before it’s dark. Come ! I have so much I want to tell you.”

He was the very personification of appeal, but, ten minutes afterwards, Margaret, going up the yacht’s side, paused on the ladder to say quickly : “ Aren’t you coming on board ?”

He shook his head, still gay, still careless, despite her obstinacy.

“ I’m only the boatman. Pay her out a bit, please, skipper, and go ahead. I’ll tow astern out of the wake, and haul up when I’m wanted.”

Margaret, watching him, felt inclined to call

## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

him back and try Avilion, instead of the large party which her first glance showed her was lounging over afternoon tea on deck. She felt shy of it for a second—not more, since shyness comes hardly to those of fixed opinions of themselves and others.

“Delighted, delighted!” fussed Mr. Begbie—whose yachting-suit took every hint of being a gentleman from him and left him a mere super-cargo—to her apologies for intrusion; “Macdonald’s below playing whist—we’ll have him up directly. Meanwhile—Alice! a cup of tea for Mrs. Macdonald. And, Knyvett, there is a chair beside you—let me introduce Mr. Knyvett, my election agent, Mrs. Macdonald.”

There was always a portentous solemnity in Mr. Begbie’s allusions to the possibility of his becoming a member of Parliament, and they invariably made him, as it were, prove his own capability for the post by an immediate attention to detail. So, seeing Ronald clinging to his mother’s skirts, he at once ordered a supply of thick bread-and-butter and a cup of milk. “With no sugar in it,” he said, confronting the child sternly. “I am sure your mamma does not allow you sugar in your milk, my boy.”

Whereupon Margaret, noticing an ominous

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

quiver about Ronald's mouth, suggested that the latter was most anxious to see the "wheels go round" generally, and if anyone could just keep an eye on him——

Ronald, therefore, going off in charge of the deck-boy, Margaret had time to wonder vaguely where she had heard the name of Knyvett before, and drop as best she could into the desultory talk around her. "You must know the people intimately, Mrs. Macdonald," began Mr. Knyvett, a stout, kindly-looking gentleman, suggestive of ledgers, weights and measures, when a tall young fellow in a kilt, approaching with the sugar-bowl, said: "How do you do, Mrs. Macdonald? Don't you remember me—Corrievreckan?"

So there she was, feeling harried, spilling her tea, saying she remembered Lord Corrievreckan very well, and was he on his way to Ardie-more?

"Ardie-more! Oh dear, no," replied the young nobleman cheerfully. "I've sold the place—wasn't rich enough to keep it. Land is an expensive luxury in the Highlands."

"It is cheaper to rent places, I think," remarked someone else to his neighbour. "I've tried both plans. Of course, if you want the dignity, that's another thing; but if it's a good bag you want,

## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

the yearly let with ghillies on the lookout for tips——”

“You live here all the year round, I’m told,” interrupted the smart lady next to her in a strong American accent. “My! how I should hate that!—though it’s a lovely country in fall, with the house full. Those little pigstyes of houses are just picturesque, and the islands set out in the ocean with the waves like pie-frills round, are too ’cute for anything.”

“May I use that for my next ‘cigar-ash’?” drawled a loungeur, beginning to scribble on his shirt-cuff. “Pies and pie-frills. A charming *nuance*! Don’t you find it hard to be so original in these wilds, far away from other people? I do.”

Margaret, listening, replying, drinking her tea, felt impatient to be gone—felt a sudden regret for that sail westward—a sudden desire to bring some reality.

Hark! A child’s scream, with the unmistakable note of dire extremity in it!

“Ronald!” Her cry came before anything else, before the confused stampede to the yacht’s side, the confused shouting for ropes, boats, life-buoys. She knew what had happened in an instant, but almost before that instant ended, a

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

halloa, clear and confident, came echoing from the stern :

“ All right ! I have him—I have him ! ”

And then, as she craned over the taffrail, she saw that the terror had gone as it had come, for there was Magnus scrambling into his boat again, while Ronald, with curls still unwet, already lay howling in the thwarts that he only “ wanted to be a deck-boy, too, and climb up a wope.”

It seemed dream-like, incredible, though Mr. Begbie was calling for hot water, blankets, brandy, and those around her were loud in relief. But she seemed to see nothing but that dripping figure holding the child as the boat was rapidly hauled alongside—the figure of the Man from the Sea bringing the gift——

“ Magnus O’Neil, by all that’s astounding ! ” said an amazed voice at her elbow. It was Mr. Knyvett.

She turned quickly. “ Magnus O’Neil ! Surely not ? ”

“ My dear madam, I know him as well as I know myself. That’s Magnus O’Neil—the man who wrote the Black Pamphlet. We thought he was dead, and uncommon sorry we were, for he is one of our best men ; but, of course, *you* are the other side. Now, I wonder where he has

## THE BLACK PAMPHLET

been all this time—up to mischief, I'll be bound. That's the worst of him—so irresponsible."

"He has been here most of the time," said Margaret quietly. "Will you tell them, Mr. Knyvett, I have gone down to Miss Begbie's cabin? Ronald must have a hot bath. He is rather delicate."

Dazed as she was, she could not trust herself to take the child from his arms.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MISUNDERSTOOD

NEITHER the hot bath, however, nor the additional precaution of going out in the yacht to the big island and driving thence in Mr. Begbie's closed carriage was of avail in preventing a possibility of croup. So, at least, said Margaret, who for the next three or four days shut herself up with her anger and a bronchitis-kettle, seeing no one but Mhairi Macinver. Now, three days to an angry woman, with the aid of one so well acquainted with every idle rumour as the minister's daughter, means much in the discovery of base motives and hidden springs of action in an offender, so that at the end of them her wrath against Magnus was hotter than it had been at first.

Hotter than ever when her brother-in-law, coming over on necessary business, and finding her hopelessly *difficile*, revenged himself by saying, in jest, that he had hoped Mr. Magnus O'Neil might have convinced her.

## MISUNDERSTOOD

“ If I had known who he was,” she interrupted fiercely, “ he should never have entered the house.”

Evan gave a little deprecating cough. “ You would have let him drown, no doubt ; you are so consistent. But you mustn’t forget that, in all probability, he prevented Ronald from drowning.”

She did not ; the remembrance was an added insult to many injuries.

“ Besides, he is really an awfully nice fellow. He is stopping with the Begbies now—Knyvett wanted him ; sings delightfully.”

Evan, rising to put some papers in his pocket, whistled the refrain of a song lightly, and Margaret’s lips set over her white teeth. So he had been singing that—an additional insult.

“ If you have nothing more to ask me, I’ll go back to the nursery,” she said briefly. “ As for Mr. Magnus O’Neil, it has been a relief to me to know who he is. It explains not a few things.”

In truth, she persuaded herself that it did, and the angry conviction made her add : “ I hope he is going soon ; Westray will be quieter without him.”

“ It couldn’t well be more tempestuous, anyhow,” remarked Evan cheerfully. “ I’ve had



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

more complaints in these last three days—but I've told every man Jack that I wash my hands of the concern—that you are running it against my wishes."

"That won't make it any easier for me to get on," she said, with a sudden break, due to self-pity, in her voice.

"My dear girl! I don't want to make it easier, and that's a fact. You are playing my game excellently—and Knyvett's, too. I heard him talking over these evictions with Magnus O'Neil, and saying they would be worth a lot of votes to him. O'Neil rather lost his temper over it, and said—— By the way, didn't you see him yesterday? He said he was coming to inquire after the boy."

"I have written and thanked him for being so prompt," she said hastily; "but I do not intend to see him. What is the use?"

Evan shrugged his shoulders, and said he did not know.

Magnus himself, however, was of a different opinion. He had sworn under his breath when John Knyvett had recognized him first; he had seen at once the disadvantage it was to him to be, as it were, discovered, and wished that he had insisted on that sail westward into the glow and

## MISUNDERSTOOD

the glitter. He would have told her himself there—she would have listened to him *there*. To be sure, he would not have had the chance of saving Ronald. Magnus, being by nature sanguine, could not find it in his heart to be very depressed. After all, what had he done? He felt for the time as if he never had been aflame against the land laws, so much so that John Knyvett shook his head disapprovingly.

“You can’t mean to give up your career?” he said incredulously. “We are certain to run you in the House before long, and then that voice of yours will tell. It has a knack of persuading people.”

“Has it?” interrupted Magnus. “I’m glad of that.” He was thinking of Margaret, only of Margaret. He told himself it was ignominious, but that did not prevent it from being the fact. Margaret, however, refused to give his voice a chance—refused even to answer his letters, and in so doing, acted foolishly in that she roused his temper. She might think what she liked of him, but she should not treat him as a leper. So one day, going into the garden, she found him there. He might have climbed over the wall for all she knew—for she did not see the traitorous Tiny keeking timorously from the pantry window—but there he was.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

"I have come," he began.

"It is very kind of you," she replied freezingly, "to take the trouble."

"I have taken the trouble, as you call it, every day for a week," he interrupted. "I wanted to tell you how sorry I am."

"There is no excuse necessary, Mr. O'Neil," she said—"none. To my notions your conduct is quite incapable of excuse, so I can only suppose that our standards are different. Surely that ends the matter between us."

When, in company with the bronchitis-kettle, she had rehearsed these words, they had seemed final, but something in his face did not waver before them.

"They end that matter, perhaps ; though even there I scarcely understand why they should. There must be such a thing as forgiveness, even when there is no love. And here—Margaret ! you know that I love you. Does that not excuse ?"

She drew back from his outstretched hands. "It would excuse nothing, even if it were true. You must think me very stupid, Mr. O'Neil ! Do you suppose that, now I know who you are, I do not understand many things which may have puzzled me before ? Why, for instance, you

## MISUNDERSTOOD

lingered on in Westray ; why you were kind to me and got my confidence ; why you gave me the advice you did ; why you made the people like and trust you as they do ?”

“ Then, if you understand all this, you must know,” he began, as she paused in the very hurry of her reproach.

She interrupted him with a contemptuous laugh.

“ Really, Mr. O’Neil, you must consider me singularly credulous ! As if it were not clear as daylight you were doing Mr. Knyvett’s work for him ! And why not ? You were paid for it, I believe. I don’t complain ; I only think it useless to talk about it.”

He stood staring after her for a moment as she turned to go in, then strode forward and laid his hand quite roughly on her shoulder.

“ Stop, please ! I don’t understand. Do you mean that I was your guest and set your tenants against you ? that I wormed myself into your confidence and then betrayed it ? that—that ”—his persistent sense of humour would not be denied—“ that I egged on Peter Macfie instead of punching—— Oh, Margaret, Margaret ! you can’t believe it ! The thing is incredible, absurd, preposterous !

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“Ask anyone—everyone—what they believe,” she retorted. “Ask Mhairi Macinver !”

“Oh, dash Mhairi Macinver ! What the—I mean, what on earth has she to do with it ? Margaret, my dear, you know that I love you—you know it ! Does a man do that sort of thing to the woman he loves ? Grant that I was wrong not to tell you at once. I suppose I was—and yet I don’t know——”

“It is just as I said,” she interrupted coldly. “Your standards are different from mine ; that’s all. Good-bye, Mr. O’Neil ! I do not want to quarrel with you, because you saved my son’s life ; I shall not forget that.”

He looked at her almost with aversion. “You make me wonder why I love you ; but I do ! And I dare say you wonder why you love me ; but you do ! That is something we neither of us are likely to forget for some time to come, unless——” He burst out suddenly into a real laugh. “It is so maddeningly absurd ! I used to think sometimes how much better it would be for you if I could have been cad enough to do this——”

“The wish, no doubt, was father to the action.”

There was a pause. “Do you mean that really ?” he said, in a quick, low voice.

## MISUNDERSTOOD

“It is the only explanation which commends itself to my common sense.”

He turned without a word and left her. She stood for a moment fighting angrily with the sudden sinking of her heart, the strange tremble of every nerve, every muscle, and then went back slowly to the nursery and the bronchitis-kettle.

It was pouring out its jet of steam into a quaint group on the hearthrug. Ronald, astride a hassock, before every toy in the nursery, to say nothing of other attempts at distraction, declaiming in a hoarse whisper to Tiny, who was squatted in front of him.

“And so, Tiny, it bleegeed awful an’——”

“Eh, mem!” ejaculated the big woman, turning to her mistress with a sigh of relief. “I’m richt glad you’ve come, and he that wasna to speak. But I just let on like, that I’d seen Mr. Magnus below, just to amuse him, an’ he was at me to tak’ him down. Then he garred me tell him tales like Mr. Magnus. So I tellt him o’ Elisha and the bears, an’ Ananias an’ Sapphiry—ay! an’ o’ burstin’s asunder in the midst, an’ gnashin’s o’ teeth, the like o’ which would hae sent any bairn o’ grace creepy-crawly; but he just wouldna away wi’ them, an’ began makin’ my bluid rin cauld wi’ ships o’ deid folks’ nail-

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

parin's, an' sairpents bitin' their ain tails, an' a gruesome beast ca'ad the Feres wolf, wi' jaws that touch airth an' sky."

"Misther Magnuth says they'd be wider if a' was woom!" croaked Ronald. "Misther Magnuth says——"

Margaret stamped her foot in sudden petulance. "Be quiet this instant, Ronald! I will not have you repeating those stories. I will not let you hear any more. Mr. Magnus shall go away; I will not be disturbed by him any more."

The boy, who, open-mouthed and eyed, had been gazing at her doubtfully, burst into howls. Misther Magnus shouldn't go—if he did, he, Ronald, would go too. Mother might stop, but he and Misther Magnuth would go right away over the sea, and never come back to horrid old Westray—like father.

It was Margaret's turn to stand wide-eyed and silent before these words for a space, ere she found courage to rebuke them.

"It's no' a bit o' use, mem, deavin' the bairn's head wi' words," said Tiny at last; "we must jest pit something into his stomach, puir lammie! For they're just a pair o' them, wi' their souls knit like to David and Jonathan. An' a David o' a man he is, wi' his songs and his slayin's o'



## MISUNDERSTOOD

thousands an' ten thousands! So, whisht, my bairn, whisht! Mr. Magnus 'll stop in Westray wi' you an' your mummaw an'——"

"Tiny!" interrupted Margaret severely.

Tiny tossed her head and sniffed. "Well, ma'am," she said dryly, "there's no reason I've seen for it to be a lie, but it is just as you choose to mak' it."

But even Magnus himself did not consider such a possibility. He was in a flaming heat of wild temper against Margaret, and that evening, as they sate smoking together, gladdened Mr. Knyvett's heart by saying that he had changed his mind. The general election was bound to be exciting, and it always amused him to speak, though he was not going to profess enthusiasm for party questions. Good sound grievances or high-handed acts of injustice would be more in his line.

John Knyvett looked at him thoughtfully. He had known Magnus for years—knew his reckless, impulsive nature, his violent tempers, and quick forgivings. It might be as well, therefore, to clinch this sudden resolution.

"I can supply you with one of the latter without delay," he said, with an easy smile. "That young fellow Macleod—his common sense is



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

dangerous, by the way—told me just now that Mrs. Macdonald had written to him this afternoon, saying that she had quite made up her mind to evict the Scarva cottars, and would do so at once if he would arrange to give them the alternative of emigration. So he has wired to see if one of the packets will come in on purpose. You might make something of that.”

Magnus, biting his cigar-end angrily, thought of Margaret, full of accusations, in the garden, seemed to see her going straight from them to write that letter—to decide on doing what she knew he had warned her not to do. It seemed a defiance, a flinging down of the glove.

“If Mrs. Macdonald is going to do that,” he said, “I have no objection to tell her my opinion of it. If she can’t repair her tenants’ houses, she should sell the island.”

“We might have an indignation meeting in the schoolhouse ; nothing very strong, you know—just a protest,” remarked John Knyvett cautiously. The bearing-rein must not be too tight.

Magnus laughed cynically. “Protestations are not much good when a woman is obstinate ; but I shall be glad to speak again ; my voice has got awfully rusty.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE EVICTION

It did not sound so to his hearers, however. Hugh Macleod, who—much to Mhairi's disgust—insisted on going to the meeting, gave a glowing account of it to Margaret.

“And he was temperate, too,” he said. “In fact, if anything, he erred on that side, for he might have made a stronger case. Indeed, with that voice and manner of his he might have said anything—they would have believed it. I saw Angus and others of his stamp simply absorbed.”

“That is what Mrs. Macdonald and I have been telling you all along, Hugh,” Mhairi said—“that it is all very well for people like you, perhaps, though I do not think you should have gone any more than I think Mr. Magnus should have spoken ; but the ignorant folk will never be understanding aright.”

“A man runs great risk of being a fool if he won't listen to both sides, my dear,” replied her

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

sturdy pioneer good-humouredly ; “and a man must have opinions and back them, if he *is* a man. What’s more, these ignorant people understand a lot more than you think—for one thing, their own interests. So, despite all the Knyvetts and his like in the world, despite Magnus O’Neil’s voice, we should get the Scarva cottars if we could only give them more time, Mrs. Macdonald. You should have seen Dugald’s face this morning when I showed him the samples of wheat and wool I’d had sent home, and told him the prices they were offering me in Glasgow.”

Margaret, who had been listening in silence, looked up quickly.

“It would be better for them, of course, if they would go willingly ; but for myself I do not care. I know it is the right thing I am doing, and I see it must be done quickly. It will give those who may refuse, even at the last, to emigrate, time to make other arrangements before the winter.”

“Well, the *St. Kilda* will be in on Friday morning, so Thursday will be your best day to evict. One night in the open should be enough ; but the captain has some wool to take on, and says he can stop till Saturday. I fancy they will all come in by then—unless there is a row——”

## THE EVICTION

“There is not likely to be a row,” interrupted Margaret coldly.

Mhairi Macinver, however, did not dismiss the subject so easily, and as she and her lover walked home declared she would not wonder if there was, just as there had been in Ireland after the publication of the Black Pamphlet.

“My dear Mhairi,” replied her lover firmly, “you haven’t read it—nor have I. All I know is that Magnus O’Neil said nothing objectionable here, and that I never heard of his saying anything of the sort.”

“Oh, Hugh! when you were saying yourself that there had been Land Leaguers about!”

He gave a low whistle. “So that’s why she’s so angry. Well, I gave her credit for more sense—and you, too, Mhairi. Can’t you see? Why, it’s much more likely to have been Peter Macfie; and Magnus O’Neil isn’t the only Nationalist in the world!”

In sight of that broad, sturdy face Mhairi’s own common sense twinged remorsefully, and she covered her confusion by saying that, Nationalist or not, people must know that so many mouths could not be fed off Scarva land, and that the cottars were fools not to take a good offer.

Dugald, at any rate, had inklings of this as he

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

l lounged behind the eternal peat-stack, thinking of that wheat and wool. The mere fact that, as representatives of the original holder, there could be no question of turning him out, made him inclined to yield. Besides, if he led the way in capitulation, Hugh Macleod had definitely promised him the lead in colonizing. Then there was Ishbel——

As he smoked disconsolately, he saw her come out of her brother's cottage, looking very smart, with his pink ribbon at her throat. What was that for ? His manly contempt for her lightness vanished in a sudden conviction that she looked very pretty ; that if she looked like that it would not be long before she found someone else—— By sunder ! was that Alick, the smith's son, coming down the road with the skulk of an expectant lover in his lingerings ?

It flashed upon Dugald that Alick had had a message to Scarva the day before also, that there was a chance, even if he gave up the wheat and wool, of his remaining a jilted man in Westray itself. He put his pipe in his pocket, and walked over to Ishbel, who, seeing his face, went red and white by turns.

“ It is not any more nonsense of that sort there will be between you and me, Ishbel,” he said

## THE EVICTION

masterfully ; “and as for the other, it may be lies or truth, but there will be no more of it, see you, for I shall take you over the sea, only you must come and bide with my mother, for I will not have my wife turned out like the rest, and I will not have you stopping with Angus, who is a liar.”

So Alick, the smith’s son, after skulking vainly behind peat-stacks and lingering by rocks, went home, and that evening all Scarva was agog with the news that Dugald was going as Hugh Macleod’s foreman, and that Ishbel Mackenzie had left her brother’s house and gone with Dugald’s mother to Clachan—to avoid the eviction, *she* said, but the gossips, putting two and two together, looked askance at Angus, who went about moodily, bereft even of the retort that she should never darken his door again, since in a few days he himself would have none to darken.

So the days passed, full of passionate inaction, bringing an increasing bitterness.

“You don’t think there will be a row—a real row, do you ?” asked Evan Macdonald anxiously of Mr. Knyvett. If there was a chance of that, it would be his duty to give his sister-in-law the protection of a man in the house, and he thought of Mr. Begbie’s *chef* with regret.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

"No," replied John Knyvett, "though I almost wish there could be. It has such an excellent effect. But your sister-in-law is a clever woman, and has made that impossible. They might break a window, or something of that sort, though I wouldn't hint at such a possibility to O'Neil. He seems positively to be afraid of their saying a bad word of Mrs. Macdonald—which they will, of course. I should like to get him away from the island before the eviction; but he won't go without me, and I rather want to *see* the thing. Personal experience tells. However, he has promised to come the day after in the yacht, and he will cheer up when he starts fresh again. That accident of his has shaken him a lot—he is certainly quite upset about this business."

"Well, I wish it were well over," replied Evan fretfully. "Why the deuce my sister-in-law sticks to the cursed place, I can't think. She looks worn to death."

She did indeed. Dr. Gilchrist, coming every day to see Ronald, shook his head over her and the boy. "But it is no use my saying anything, Tiny," he remarked to that soft-hearted, big-boned creature. "I would like to tell her she is getting hysterical over this business of keeping

## THE EVICTION

Westray—which is the fact, only she wouldn't believe me. That is the worst of it. I—I—do you know, Tiny, I think I should like to get away from Westray myself—begin with a clean bill of health elsewhere. I would if—if I were sure of myself—if someone——”

“Ye're gettin' on fine,” interrupted Tiny rather hastily. “An' as for Mistress Macdonald, puir lammie! I ken weel what's wrang wi' her, though she'll no' listen to me, either, for a' the arrows I'm sending after yon David o' a man, Magnus. As if we that sit at the back o' a hill can tell for sure what happens at the tither side o't! But, see you! if the wee lammie's no better, sure ye must crave a consultation wi' yon London physician that's bidin' wi' Begbie. An' he'll sort her—they're just accustomed to nairvous disorders an' heart affections. Sae haud a good grip on your razor, Gilchrist, an' think no' a stubble's like a Michaelmas goose, or ye may miss a fair chance o' risin' in yer profession. In the meantime, since arrows are o' nae avail, I'll just become an Egyptian, an' have a parleyvoo wi' David.”

So that evening, on pretence of making purchases at the shop, she tramped over sturdily to the big island, and told Magnus O'Neil he was



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

a fool for his pains—ineffectually, as she admitted as she tramped back again, though she comforted herself by asserting that, though the pair o' them were real stiff in the neck, they were weak in the legs, and might be tripped up unawares any moment. Yet her hints and reproaches had one effect: they made Magnus O'Neil stop dead on the road to Scarva, when—the evening before the evictions were to take place—he met Margaret going down there alone.

“Mrs. Macdonald!” he said impulsively; “don’t. What is the use? I have no right to speak, of course, but surely your brother-in-law might prevent you from——”

“Are you afraid how they may interrupt your ‘right to object’?” she asked quietly. “I am not—or, rather, *I* am quite ready to take the consequences of my own actions and words. Are you?”

“Quite,” he echoed; then suddenly he held out his hand. “Good-bye, Mrs. Macdonald; I shall never see you again, remember.”

“I suppose not. Good-bye.”

That was the end, she thought, with a fierce pity and pain for herself, for him, even for the people who would be homeless before the next night.

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## THE EVICTION

“It was the most commonplace affair in the world,” said Mr. Knyvett, in rather an ill-used tone of voice, when he returned to the Lodge after the great event which had loomed so large in anticipation was over. “The thing went without a hitch, as they say of a play; and I must admit it was splendidly managed—the *St. Kilda* lying in the bay, carts ready to take anything. And, then, it was such a confoundedly fine day! It made the whole thing look like a picnic!”

“But what *really* happened, Lord Corrievreckan?” asked the American lady. “Do tell.”

“Nothing. Half the people had cleared out already, in anticipation. They knew the inspectors had orders to wire for soldiers at the least resistance, and some had made up their minds to go with Macleod all along. Of course, the women keened a bit when the first roof came down—the roofs belong to the tenant, you know—so it is a kind of ‘Take everything you have a right to, *if you please*’—a bit of an insult, eh? And there was an old lady who tried to nonplus the police by going to bed without any clothes—I beg your pardon, but it was really very funny. They just bundled her up, blankets and all, and carried her over to the new house—

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

a much better one, by the way—which Mrs. Macdonald has given her——”

“I don’t see how that affects the question,” began Magnus, rather hotly. He had been out all day, and looked at once fagged and eager.

“Theoretically, not at all,” went on Lord Corrievreckan curtly; “but as a matter of fact the only person who objected was the village idiot. We left her sitting in the hot peat ashes of her desecrated hearth howling—but, then, she was a fool !”

Magnus looked as if he meant a nasty retort, then got up and left the room. It was not worth while answering people who could smile at that picture of the roofless hovels, deserted by all save the poor fond fool. Margaret would not smile at it—he knew that—and the knowledge brought a curious pain, a curious pleasure.

He was right. Hugh Macleod, coming up to Westray House the last thing in order to report progress, found her more eager to know if *Kategorach* had been put in safe custody for the night than to listen to his just satisfaction in having, with Dugald’s help, persuaded three-quarters of the Scarva folk to begin a new life rationally.

“And the rest will come in to-morrow, see

## THE EVICTION

if they won't—even Angus and his lot," he said cheerfully. "They will stick out as long as they dare, and talk big, but the *St. Kilda's* steam shall be up to-morrow evening, and the orders for her to be off with the dawn. That will give time for anyone to slip into her on the sly and save their bounce——"

"But, Kate!" interrupted Margaret anxiously. "I can't bear to think of her there alone, keening——"

"My dear Mrs. Macdonald," said Hugh, "it isn't the first balmy moonlight night that *Kate-gorach* has spent in the open, chuckling and whimpering; and I can assure you that every rational being has found a bed somewhere—mostly on board. So there is nothing to fret about."

Was there not? Margaret asked herself as, long after he had gone, she sate watching the moonlit plain of sea westward. The dark bar of Scarva stretched far into it. So dark to-night. Sometimes—not often—but if folk were stirring from hut to hut, she had seen a light there in the past. There was no chance of that to-night. The deed was done. Now he would know that nothing—nothing at all—could come between her and her determination. Now she herself

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

would feel it irrevocable ; there would—there could be—no more doubt, no more struggle. Ronald would live his life——

The thought brought a sudden recollection of the child upstairs, watched in the nursery whose windows gazed upon the strand, by Tiny, and the recollection brought a quick frown. She seemed to see the delicate face, and hear the laboured breathing which necessitated such watching through the night. Would he, indeed, live his life ? Ah, well ! she must scrape and pinch to get him away for a bit. He would get stronger as he grew up—even Dr. Gilchrist allowed that.

She rose reluctantly, telling herself it must be late ; must be time for her to try for sleep, if she were to relieve Tiny at the half-watch. As she turned down the lamp and passed into the hall, the clock struck one. So late ! Too late to make bed worth while when sleep was so long of coming as it had grown to be. Ah, well ! that must be over now—it must.

So, suddenly, with the knowledge that the deed was done, the thought of Kate-*gorach* returned. Was she there on the cold hearthstone—the poor fool left lamenting when wiser folk had consoled themselves ?

The moonlight streaming in through the still

## THE EVICTION

open door was tempting. Margaret paused, slipped on her cloak and stepped out. It was a glorious night—soft, warm, still. The walk would rest her more than tossing uselessly on her bed for an hour, and if Kate were there she could bring her home.

The air seemed to restore her vigour, her calm, at once, and as, with a free step, she passed over the moorland, alone save for a startled sleepy plover or two aroused by her step, she felt a sort of exultation in the thought that this—this moorland set in the midst of the sounding seas—was to be hers and her children's for ever. What did anything else matter save this? So, as she walked, her eyes feasted themselves on the still solitude, on the great silver shield of the sea, and even when she crested the last rise, and the cluster of roofless huts lay before her, silent and lifeless in the moonlight, a great relief filled her.

A lesser one, too, for the silence. Even the poor fool was not there moaning over those cold hearths. Hark! what was that? Margaret paused in her swift step and listened.

A laugh—unmistakably a laugh—mirthless and unreal, yet still a laugh.

She passed on again, with a sudden chill at her heart. So Kate-*gorach* must be there, after all—

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Kate the fool, chuckling over something she had found.

She could see nothing by reason of the rude boulder walls—less like human habitation than ever now the haycock of a roof was gone—until she stood in the very doorway. So, as if in a frame, she saw a picture she never forgot.

Kate-*gorach* among the still-warm ashes of the hearth that was never to be lit again, laughing at some treasures which she had evidently come back to find. They lay on the floor beside her, and one—a long flat envelope—gleamed white and clear in the flood of moonshine.

Margaret gave a little cry. She knew what it was in a moment.

It was the deed of sale.

The next instant her voice came steadily :

“Give that to me, Kate. It’s mine.”

## CHAPTER XX

### CLINICAL SURGERY

“IT is mine.”

Yes, it was hers ; of that there was no shadow of doubt. It was hers, she felt, to do with as she chose.

So it was no faint suspicion of her own right, no qualm of conscience, which, half an hour afterwards, kept Margaret Macdonald hesitating in the drawing-room at Westray House. Indeed, after she had stilled *Kate-gorach's* outcries with the pennies which the fool loved above all other treasures, Margaret's swift steps homewards had kept pace with her swift desire to do as she had always said she would do—destroy this deed, which had come into her hands by chance.

Chance ? No ! This was no chance ; the very method of its coming—the solitude, the secrecy—were so many signs that it was a Providence, so much evidence that she had been right all along. It seemed to her a reward.



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

So she came into the empty moonlit room without a quiver of mind or body, and, closing the door behind her, passed swiftly to the writing-table and lit the taper with a steady hand.

And then ?

And then she stood still, gazing at the lighted candle with a sudden fear, a sudden doubt in her eyes. Her hand holding the deed sank to the table, the other rose to her forehead, the long white fingers pushing back the waves of her hair slowly, dreamily.

Was that another hand—white, eager, firm—pushing the candle closer ? Was that a voice, musical exceedingly, bidding her be quick, lest she should have to read——

What ?

“Is it a heart, Marg’re—ret—is it a heart ?”

As in a flash she saw his face, felt the quick quiver in her veins—felt, as she had never felt before, the full measure of her own regret. So for a space she stood paralyzed, powerless, before a sweeping, overwhelming desire to give up everything else for this—this vague, causeless content. After all, it would not be her doing ; it would only be a giving in——

## CLINICAL SURGERY

The thought roused her to bitter self-reproach, and the flame was flickering tentatively at one corner of the long envelope, when the door opened hurriedly, and Tiny's voice came with a ring of relief in it.

"Praise be ye're back, mem," she said sharply ; "an' I comin' twice to fetch you, and no knowin' what to be at, wi' the puir lammie breathin' like a snail on a slate, an' yon twal-apostle-o'-a-Marion sleepin' on an' takin' her rest where she soudna be, for she's no' in her room. Likely she'll be at the Clachan, skirling good-bye to the Scarva folk. But come awa' and see for yersel', mem, for if Gilchrist is to be wanted, the sooner he's gotten at the better."

A minute later Margaret, listening with a new fear in her eyes to the child's breathing, so graphically described by Tiny, had, for the time, forgotten the deed which she had thrust into a drawer—forgotten everything in this pressing demand upon her motherhood.

"You must go for the doctor at once," she said briefly. "Tell him to come as quickly as he can ; say it is a bad attack—a very bad attack—the worst——" She broke off, as if the uselessness of her words called for silence.

But Tiny, swathing a shawl about her hurriedly,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

found solace from her fears in mutterings and shakings of the head. "As quick's he can. Ay ! but it's no easy for sinfu' man to be changin' a vile body in the twinkling o' an eye, razors or no razors, an' I've no' seen Gilchrist sae stubbly as he was yestreen, this while back. It's just they '*Here's to you.*' They're the verra mischeef ; for his heart canna tarry them an' his head canna carry them. But, there ! it's ill cryin' ower milk that's no' spilt, and mayhap I'm miscaaing the puir lammie."

She was not, however, and—big though her heart was—it seemed to find its way out of her big body at the sight of the doctor's face as, at her entrance, he rose from the tumbler-ringed table in the Clachan Inn, where Peter Macfie and some other worthies were still threeping over the events of the day, and lingering to wish good luck to all and sundry.

Yet she wasted no words in reproach. She simply took the culprit by the shoulder, and pushed him gently before her from the room.

"Come awa', man," she said, and her voice, despite its suspicion of tears, was firm. "Just come you awa', like a foolish virgin. There's nae time to be wastet on the trimming o' lamps or beards, wi' yon puir bairnie scrawin' for breath.

## CLINICAL SURGERY

Sae come as ye are, an' thank Heaven ye're no sae bad as ye might be."

In truth, she was grateful for the fact, though her relief was dimmed by doubt as to the effect cold air and the necessity for action might have upon him. But they—or that firm clasp on his shoulder, as the quaint couple hurried through the moonlight—seemed to clear instead of confuse, to the extent even of making him essay a feeble excuse.

"Haud yer whisht, man," interrupted Tiny sternly. "If there's a drap hot watter left from the lammie's bath, ye sall hae it to yer shavin', but ye're just a lost soul till then. Sae keep every grain o' sense ye have for yer profession, and dinna lavish it on yersel'. There's no sic a hurry for your Day o' Judgment, doctor, as there is for my puir bairnie's life."

So she thought ; so, perhaps, the erring doctor thought also in that first rapid half-hour or so by the side of extreme sickness, when the danger itself seems lost in the eager application of remedies.

Even Margaret seemed to forget it in the passionate protest that this must do good or that—a protest which grew more urgent as time passed, bringing no relief—or only that relief to the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

listeners which, coming from gradual defeat in the struggle for breath, means greater danger. Even so, when stilled by growing weakness, the sound seemed to fill the room, to fill the very house, as, in the quick-come greyness of dawn, Dr. Gilchrist made an excuse for following Tiny into the landing.

“What is’t, doctor ?” she whispered, feeling, even in her distress, a certain consolation in the knowledge that he had not failed so far, that he had done as well as any ; so the swift grip of his left hand on her wrist, the look on his face, visible against the lightening square of the window, startled her.

“What ?” he echoed. “That !” He held his right hand against the glimmer. “That’s the matter ; look at it—look how it shakes, and—and—my God ! is that a hand to have when that sound comes through the door ?” He dropped her wrist, with a curse at himself.

“Ay, it shakes a bit,” she began consolingly ; but ye’re doing fine, ye’re——”

He broke in on her excuses, as she had on his.

“You don’t understand ; you said there was time for my judgment ; but it’s here, Tiny ! I’ve seen it coming for an hour. Ah, curse the drink ! Is that a hand to have to-night when

## CLINICAL SURGERY

the child may choke any moment—when I must be ready ? Tiny ! if it comes I shall be a murderer, for I daren't do it—I daren't !”

As he stood so, forgetful almost of her—his voice barely a whisper—lost in a sort of deadening self-contempt, even Tiny, uncomprehending, could not miss the tragedy in his face.

“ Do what, my dear ? ” she asked fearfully.

The question roused him to a measure of self-control.

“ It is an operation, Tiny,” he said slowly, “ which might have to be done at any moment, or might not ; pray Heaven it mayn't. Well, I must go back ; I must be there, at any rate, for there is no one else—no one else ! and I—well, I must go back ! I can do so much.”

As the door closed behind him, Tiny collapsed on the first step of the stair and rocked herself backwards and forwards with a confused murmur of “ Puir lammie ! puir lammie ! ” And then suddenly her pity, her vague alarms, merged in the thought that the doctor was wrong—there *was* someone else ! There was the English physician over at the Lodge ! He must be able to do this thing, if it had to be done. The tide must be fairly out ; she might get across the strand in half an hour—three-quarters—and then

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

the Lodge was not far off. It was a chance, anyhow—a chance of preventing—murder !

So across the level stretches of sand, over the fringes of seaweed, skirting the ripple of tide as closely as it dared, a tall, ungainly figure set off to run as it had not run for years ; and as it ran a perfect tumult of physical and mental distress for itself and its world was concentrated in that occasional gasp of “ Puir lammie ! puir lammie ! ” a gasp that became more and more breathless as the feet had to slacken speed against the mind’s desire, and Tiny came nearer and nearer to that deadlock between soul and body which comes hardest to the strong.

It never came, however, for someone who, restless in his anger, was watching the sun rise for the last time on Westray, saw the figure, and ran to meet it from the opposite shore, full of quick suspicions of danger or even insult to Margaret. For Magnus had seen enough drink and heard enough talk at the Clachan to fear that Angus and his like were not to be trusted. They might only mean to have the quarrel out in words, but the thought of even that, to him, was intolerable. It was a relief, therefore, to bid Tiny go back and trust him with the message. He would be quicker, he said. And she, pausing



## CLINICAL SURGERY

to regain her breath, told herself gladly that he would, as she saw him skirt the tide like a lap-wing. The sight gave an added regret to her favourite ejaculation as she retraced her steps; for, "puir lammies" though they were, these menfolk, she told herself, had a knack of standing between womenfolk and the cold world. And there was one woman, proud though she was, who sorely needed a buckler; and that even the weakest of men could be at times—even the doctor! The memory sent Tiny on at double speed, gaining fear and hope alternately from the now sunlit windows of the nursery gleaming in the distance like a morning star—hope because the light seemed an augur far from death; fear, because it told how long she had been away. If she should be too late!

But as, breathless with anxiety and haste, she ran past the kitchen window, she caught a glimpse of Dr. Gilchrist himself stirring something in a saucepan over the fire, and her heart gave a great leap. He would not be doing that if she were too late—nay, more, he would not even be downstairs unless something of immediate danger was over. The conviction allowed the condemnation of the sinner, which she had hitherto repelled, to invade her pity. She



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

slackened speed, marched in on the culprit like a grenadier, and pushed him from the saucepan cavalierly.

"If ye canna do yer ain work, doctor," she said, "there's nae call for ye to be doin' mine, sae I'll trouble you for the spune. The bairn is better, I'll wager; but it's sma' thanks to you."

But Dr. Gilchrist was past blame—past everything but a great gratitude. "Yes, he's better; not out of danger, of course," he said soberly; "but *it*—oh, Tiny—it never came. That's over, for the present." And then suddenly even the stubbles could not hide the soft quiver of his mouth.

"Then ye're no a murderer, sma' thanks to you, either," she remarked relentlessly, adding with intense scorn: "An' what may this be ye're making? Is't a poultice or beef-tea, or just a drop toddy for yer ain comfortin'?"

But the doctor was past even that. "It isn't drink, anyway, Tiny," he said humbly. "I swore if—if *it* didn't come that I'd never touch a drop again, and, so help me God, I won't."

Tiny stood looking at him austerely for a minute, then gave up the struggle and dissolved into tears and smiles. It was the best news—after

## CLINICAL SURGERY

the bairn's betterment—that she had heard this long time, she said, and all would go merry as a marriage-bell; but, Lordsakes! there was the English doctor would be over in the click of an eye, since yon David-o'-a-man had said they would come across in the launch that had steam up for the shooting-party, and *that* would take no time. And the doctor like a laid oat-field! However, there was plenty of hot water, and the laird, puir lammie! would not grudge the loan o' a razor to his son's physician, who could shave himself to the semblance o' a decent professional man before the poultice or the beef-tea, or whatever the ill-looking mess was, could be ready to take upstairs.

Shaving, however, partakes of the nature of an operation, and requires nerve. Now, the doctor's—what with sheer excitement superadded to the original tremble—was gone. His hand shook horribly. He stood before the little glass hung by the kitchen window, which Tiny used for the due settlement of caps, and worked away conscientiously, laboriously, while Tiny, stirring at the saucepan, watched him from under bent brows, until across the bay came an unmistakable sound—the hooter of a steam-launch. Then she laid down the spoon, and the sound faded into

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

the scroop of a chair dragged over a stone floor ; the next minute Dr. Gilchrist, pausing in despair, felt himself peremptorily taken possession of, and thrust into a seat.

“ Sit you still,” came the broad, kindly voice, as a pair of capable hands twisted a kitchen cloth scientifically under his chin. “ I’ll no’ cut *your* throat, sae ye needn’t fear. Lordsakes ! I’ve had the like to do before to my gude-man that’s gone, puir lammie !”

A man who is being shaved with extreme rapidity cannot say much ; perhaps he thinks the more. Dr. Gilchrist’s face, at any rate, as he rose and wiped his chin, was full of thought. The hooter of the launch could be heard again, so it must be nearing the boat-pier. But there was five minutes yet—five minutes for——

Dr. Gilchrist laid down the kitchen cloth and walked deliberately to the fire.

“ Tiny,” he said, “ if you will marry me, I promise you shall never have to do it to this gude-man.”

Tiny went white, then red, then resumed her stirring of the saucepan vigorously.

“ Haud yer whisht !” she said, in an odd voice. “ Is this a time to be marryin’ and givin’ in marriage wi’ a Sodom and Gomorrah o’ judg-

## CLINICAL SURGERY

ment close ahint us? If ye're nae feared, I am. I'm no' goin' to be a pillar o' saut to any man."

"That's just what you'll be, though, for all that," retorted the doctor, seemingly quite satisfied.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A WEATHERCOCK

“ You mean that it is a matter of life or death ? ” said Margaret.

The long day of strain, of forgetfulness of all save that struggle for breath, was over, and she stood at bay, as it were, before words just spoken by the London physician, who, much to Dr. Gilchrist's delight, had insisted on returning to see for himself the further effects of a certain new remedy which the former had tried as a last desperate resort in his deadly anxiety of the morning—and with the best results. She was steadying herself with one hand resting on the writing-table, and the touch of it had brought a sudden memory of something that lay hidden in one of the drawers—something which it would be useless to hide if this were true.

The great man, with that distinctive look of finality which comes to those accustomed to the

## A WEATHERCOCK

giving of such flats, buttoned up his coat and began to put on his gloves.

“My dear madam,” he said, “this attack is, I believe, happily over, thanks—humanly speaking—to the skill and care of Dr. Gilchrist, whom it has been a great pleasure to me to meet, I hope not for the last time; but we must not have another. The child must go South as soon as it can be moved; must remain South. Briefly—I do not mince matters, my dear lady, when truth is valuable—you might as well nail the boy in his coffin now as try to rear him in this rigorous climate—you might as well——”

“Thanks!” interrupted Margaret; “I understand.”

There was a sort of cold passion in her face, her voice; and the hand on the table clenched itself tighter. The doctor held out his with a professional comprehension that somehow or another he had dealt a blow. “Good-bye. Come, come! I dare say it will be better for you, too. Life must be a little dreary for you, surely, up here in the winter. I have enjoyed my stay immensely, but I am not sorry to be going with the swallows. Going to-night, too, which reminds me I am late as it is—going, by the way, with a charming young fellow who

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

knows you well, and says he will never forget your great kindness to him. He has been most anxious about our little patient all day, and will, I am sure, be rejoiced at hearing that the sunny South may make a strong man of him yet. Perhaps I might take some message——”

“None,” interrupted Margaret quickly ; then added, as if in excuse of her abruptness : “My husband lost his life in saving Mr. O’Neil’s, so he has some cause to be grateful. I do not know that I have any.”

When they had gone she stood still, looking dully at the darkening grey sky, and the chill expanse of darkening grey sea. The candles were lit—had been lit for the doctors’ consultation—but there was no use for them now—no use at all ; and yet she would not decide on anything—*could* not decide on anything. She would wait, she told herself, till the morrow. Then, when *he* had gone—gone out of her life for ever—she would face the future ; not now. So she blew out the candles and went dully up to the western room, where the doctors had moved the child, away from the chance of the north-east wind, which at times seemed to curl round the nursery window. It was the room where she had first seen the Man from the Sea, and, despite its

## A WEATHERCOCK

warmth, a chill struck to her heart as she entered it. And Tiny, keeping watch over the now sleeping child, seemed to feel it chilly also, for ere she relinquished her task, she stirred the fire, and looked round with a dissatisfied air.

“Weel, weel !” she said, half to herself ; “ he was jest of a cheerful countenance, yon David-o’-a-man ; and Jonathan, puir wee lamb ! is but an ill exchange. Do ye mind, mem, hoo he wad hae a licht on his face like the cannell o’ the righteous that’ll no’ be hidden under a bushel, an’——”

“Tiny,” interrupted Margaret quickly, “hadn’t you better see to the kitchen fire as well ? Marion is not to be trusted.”

“Trusted !” echoed Tiny, rising to the lure. “The fires o’ hell itself wad be squenched ’gin she had chairge o’ them. An’ like as not, she’s awa’ to the Clachan : jest a Moabiteess-o’-a-woman liftin’ up her voice an’ weepin’ damp tears ower fouk that’s got a long journey before them. Eh ! I’m just wud, always, to be at they sort when they do it to me, garrin’ me catch cold, or say I’ve gotten one, to excuse my ain pocket-hank ! But, there ! some fouk canna do a Saturday to Monday return wi’out tears, an’ I’ll be bound there’s plenty o’ saut water at Clachan



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

the nicht, tho' not eneuch to slacken the whisky, maybe."

Perhaps not. So at least thought Hugh Macleod, who spent the day in what he called herding his sheep, and who never rested till he got most of them safely on board the *St. Kilda*, ready for her start at dawn. In truth, the struggle which had been going on in so many between obstinacy and wisdom, made harder by the condolences of friends who tramped over for a last good-bye to those who were leaving, had been a trial. The news, too, of the little laird's dire peril had added to the general resentment by hinting that the evictions might do no good even to those who enforced them. For if the estate passed, as it must, to Evan Macdonald, he would surely sell it to Mr. Begbie. And then this tyranny would have been needless.

No doubt most of those who looked at the *St. Kilda* regretfully as she lay waiting for them in the bay, knew in their hearts that she was really the only way out of the *impasse*, and that Mr. Begbie himself could hardly give mere squatters and cottars land when the crofters—those very friends who were drinking luck to them—clamoured for more ; still, it was not a time in which to confess the truth to themselves.

## A WEATHERCOCK

On Angus Mohr, however, the only man who, as the day wore on, still stood out against solid good sense, the little laird's struggle against death had a totally different effect. For if the estate passed into other hands, the very *raison d'être* of his obstinacy would pass, too, since he could no longer fight, no longer be an irreconcilable. Then, underneath all the modern modulations, the old feudal call to follow the master was clearer to his ears than to the ears of most ; and so he felt vaguely that Westray without the Macdonalds would be so unlike the old Westray of his birth that there seemed little choice in strangeness between it and that more distant New Westray where, at least, his neighbours would be about him. But how—being firm fixed to any position he had once taken up as a Highland stirk barring a road—he was to sacrifice pride and give way, he knew not ; so he kept aloof moodily from the others, from the drinkings to good luck and the condolences on evil fortune alike, and wandered about idly by himself, kicking stones from his path savagely, and casting ireful glances at the *St. Kilda*, as if she were to blame, with the result that evening found him, rather to his own surprise, sober as a judge.

Hugh Macleod remarked on the fact when,

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

after seeing his men safely on board, he went back to the manse to tea. In a way, he said, Angus, with all his faults, was worth the lot. He had more grit than the rest of them put together, and he, Hugh, meant to have at him again now he had time.

“I wish you would be having at old Flora, too,” said Mhairi in an injured tone. “She is neither to hold nor to bind. She just is lying there in that comfortable cottage that is twice what the other was, and with a window and fireplace besides, talking piously of the sin of removing your neighbour’s landmark, and not listening to a word one has to say—a wicked old woman, speaking of the finger of Providence as if it will be her own ; just a murderer at heart—as I was telling her clearly—willing the poor wee lairdie should die so that she might be talking of the Tower of Siloam.”

“Well, he is not going to die this time, so Gilchrist says ; but the London doctor has told Mrs. Macdonald she can’t keep him here, and, as O’Neil said—he was at the inn when the doctor came down—it will be an awful blow to her.”

Mhairi tossed her head. “It is little he will be caring whatever, as I was telling Mrs. Mac-

## A WEATHERCOCK

donald to-day. It is my belief that he would be glad if they were to make a fuss—if they were to break her windows, as someone was saying they talked about.”

Hugh Macleod’s face settled into a most emphatic decision. “I’d like to see them try it. And as for O’Neil, it’s absurd! Why, he thinks of no one but Mrs. Macdonald. Can’t you see he is madly in love——”

Mhairi interrupted him with great dignity. “You were saying something of that before, Hugh, and I do not think it at all pretty, and she not a year widowed. But, as for that, it does not matter. She is not in love with him, whatever, for she was telling me to-day, when I went up to see if I could help, that he had brought her ill-luck, and she was glad he was going. So will you have another cup of tea, Hugh? There is plenty in the pot.”

“Well, he won’t be long here now, at any rate,” remarked her lover, waiving the point. “I said good-bye to him just now. The yacht leaves at eleven to-night, in order to catch the last of the ebb, and that’ll bring them in time for the mail at Oban, if it doesn’t blow; but the barometer’s going down, and it looks squally in the north-east.”

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

It looked distinctly squally, and a shower, half sleet, half spray, blew straight from the pole when, after endless delays, John Knyvett, who had been fussing to get off for an hour or more, walked down from the Lodge to where the yacht's dinghy had been waiting to take the party on board. They were minus the doctor as it was, who, as John Knyvett said testily, after wasting valuable time in making up his mind to come, had made it up the other way, and stuck to his cigar, and the swift steamer next day.

“Why shouldn't he?” remarked Magnus indifferently. “What's twelve hours? And we shall most likely miss the train at Oban as it is. We ought to have started half an hour ago.”

John Knyvett, slipping on a seaweedy rock in the dim light of the lantern carried ahead, swore under his breath.

“I don't know what the mischief is up with you, O'Neil,” he said irritably. “You seem to care for nothing. There you are, the possessor of a great gift to be used for the benefit of humanity, and, upon my soul, I believe you have been using it to persuade people to put up with gross injustice. Well, thank Heaven! that's the boat at last; and perhaps, when I get you away

## A WEATHERCOCK

from this cursed island, you may return to your senses."

"No doubt," said Magnus lightly. In a way he hoped it might be so, and, as the boat shot out into the darkness towards the swaying, dipping lights, which were all that was visible of the yacht as she waited for a flying start on the rougher water beyond the point, he felt a distinct relief that the incident was over—absolutely over, even for Margaret. He was sorry for her, of course—sorry she should have the pain of giving in ; but, after all, it served her right. For the life of him, he could not help a resentful complacency at the thought that Fate had been on his side ; at the thought, also, that his love must be lessening if he could think this. So he sate listening cheerfully enough to the farewell jokes which were being bandied between the rowers and the man with the lantern, who remained a lessening star on the looming shadow of the land—jokes made in the freedom and confidence of Gaelic not understood of the Sassenachs, of course ; for the yacht had but newly come in, and the man with the lantern did not know Magnus by sight. So, carelessly enough, a message was sent back to the other ship due to start at dawn, which made one hearer set his

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

teeth and wait for more. And then, suddenly, without a word, the boat swung round, for Magnus held the tiller-ropes.

"Look out, man!" called John Knyvett hastily. "Where are you steering to?"

"Back," replied Magnus—"I'm going back."

"Back!" echoed his friend. "We can't; we haven't time. Oh, dash it all! What's up now?"

The rowers were pausing on their oars in sheer surprise, but they settled to them again in hurried dismay at a few words, in guttural, forcible Gaelic, from the stern sheets.

"Only those devils have got some plan," replied Magnus, "and I must find out——"

"Plan about what? We shall miss the mail. Are you mad, O'Neil? What the deuce—what—I say——"

The boat was shooting shorewards again now, and the speaker paused, sputtering and stammering in wrath and amazement.

"It is about smashing Mrs. Macdonald's windows. I thought we—Macleod and I—had settled that, but it seems——"

John Knyvett laid violent hands on the tiller-ropes.

"O'Neil," he said quickly, in a low voice,



## A WEATHERCOCK

“look here ! Don’t be a fool—don’t ruin your life for a woman ! Come away with me. What do a few panes of glass matter ? And if you stay——”

“I’ll join you with the doctor at Oban to-morrow by the swift steamer. It’s no use, Knyvett. I shan’t keep you a moment ; we are almost in shallow water now, and those fools, those idiots, shan’t——” He had slewed the boat round again, and was over the side in knee-deep water. “Now, then, take her back, men, sharp as you can. Good-bye, Knyvett.”

The disappointed agent took up the ropes mechanically. “I wish to Heaven,” he said, in tones of aggrieved patience, protest, and regret, “that someone would get a hand on your helm and steer you, sir. You’re a born weathercock—a man of no principle—a turncoat—a—a clever, consummate ass !”

Magnus, recovering himself from a slip in his hasty jump, which had jammed his foot between two stones, laughed softly.

“I dare say I am, Knyvett. I can’t help that ; but I can prevent a cowardly outrage.”

“Cowardly outrage be hanged ! You’ve said more in your time, my good sir, than would bring about——”



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

But Magnus was wading shorewards rapidly. The scheme at which the joker had hinted of a raid on Westray House at the last moment, just to show what the public opinion of Scarva was before the *St. Kilda* carried it away for ever, was more of a silly prank than a danger, but it was none the less intolerable. He must get over to the Clachan—to Macleod—and stop it. The strand was the nearest way, for, judging by the tide that morning, it should be out, or nearly out. The night was pitch-dark, to be sure, but there would always be the light in the little laird's nursery as a guiding-star.

Poor little sick Ronald! They should not smash his window. The man's heart grew soft at the thought of the child.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A FOOL'S WISDOM

OVER on the other side of the strand, however, the same thought was bringing a similar softness to another man's heart—a heart hard enough as a rule, but given to sudden irrational meltings, sudden rebellions, sudden loyalties, incomprehensible almost to itself. And so, long after the lights in the *St. Kilda* had dwindled to those on the mastheads, Angus Mohr loitered restlessly in and out of the Clachan, uncertain whether to go back to the hovel where he and his had found a temporary shelter, or walk boldly into the parlour—where Hugh Macleod was cheerfully smoking his pipe, till, the last lounge having drifted away to bed, he could safely go to his own—and tell something which he knew.

The day had been a sore trial to his rough, undisciplined instincts. The thought of the little laird's death had driven him one way ; the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

later news of probable recovery, while driving him another, had been a strange satisfaction.

And now, an hour or so ago, Marion had been down again to the ship for a last satisfactory weep, and Ishbel—Ishbel, whom Angus dared not part with in anger—had, after the manner of her kind, magnified her past services at the house with lamentations over the Macdonalds and messages to the wee laddie. Angus had overheard it all ere, after saying his good-bye, he left the *St. Kilda* for the shore, and it had roused a strange echo in his breast, making him feel that, no matter what Mistress Macdonald had done, the boy was Westray still. Who knew but what—if he lived to man's estate—he might be one of the old sort—a master of whom to be proud? Yet those fools, who had not the pluck to stay and starve obstinately as he might have to do, meant to smash Westray's windows; for, when all was said and done, the child was the owner of the old house, and not his mother. But for her there would be no question as to what a henchman should do; as it was, when folk turned other folk out of their homes, they must expect retaliation.

Despite this conclusion, however, when Hugh Macleod finally hurried mansewards some time

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

after midnight, Angus joined a loose stride to his sharper, shorter one, on pretence of going homewards too.

“So you are not coming with us, after all,” said the former in the teeth of the chill north wind, which every now and again brought a suspicion of sleet with it. “It is a pity, Angus. What are you going to do?”

“Stop,” replied Angus laconically. “It will cost more to those who have to pay, with the wife and bairns on the parish; and it is not working I am any more.”

Hugh smiled to himself at the cunning and audacity of the man. “Well! It will not come out of a Macdonald’s pocket, anyhow, Angus; for the doctors have said the little laird cannot live in Westray, and that he must go South. And so, I fancy—in fact, I am certain—the estate must be sold. Poor little chap! He is being turned out, too, you see—told by Fate, or whatever you like to call it, that he can’t make a living on this soil!”

The long, loose stride shortened a bit—shortened still more, finally came to a dead stop, with a grip of a rough hand on Hugh’s arm and a compassionate exclamation in the rough voice.

“Turned out—Macdonald turned out—the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

poor wee lad that has no fault ! It's a queer world, Macleod—a queer world."

It seemed so indeed to Angus, as he walked on again, muttering to himself, thinking, with that odd, formless loyalty, of the child lying sick. And then suddenly he stopped again, laid his hand once more on Hugh Macleod's arm, and told what he knew, scarcely knowing, however, why he told it. The sick child, ousted of his own, should not be insulted for other people's fault — so much was certain, but nothing more ; and so, five minutes afterwards, Hugh, with Angus behind him, was retracing his steps Clachanwards.

But if the latter felt that the sick child ought not to suffer for the faults of others, Margaret, watching beside the boy, knew that he was suffering for it. Her mind, going drearily over the past, saw with a new perception the uselessness, the folly, of all her efforts. Her loveless marriage, her long struggle, her sacrifice of everything for the sake of that strange, irrational tie between her race and Westray, had come to this : she was ousted—evicted by Fate.

She looked down on the small white face lying on the pillow where she had first seen the one which Tiny had said might be a gift of God to her,

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

and her sense of injury grew with the feeling that Ronald had gone over to the enemy. Ronald, also, had chosen the sun, the softnesses of life. So had her husband in the past ; and, perhaps, if he had had more of them—— Ah ! how could one judge rightly of such things for others, when one had only one's own standard to go by ? Even Magnus——

She moved over to the table, and, resting her head on her hands, sat lost in a dreamy amaze at herself and her world, and conscious chiefly of a dull regret for her own useless pain. She had done her best ; it had availed nothing, and nobody cared that she had failed—no one.

The chill of the first hours of a new day—a day which must be empty of all things—seemed to strike into her very soul as she waited for the dawn to bring Tiny to take her place. Then she would be free to do what must be done ; for dully, scarcely consciously, she had decided on sending the deed of sale to her brother-in-law. It would be easier, she felt, to abide by the action of another than to take the initiative herself. To say she was willing to sell seemed impossible, but when dawn came she could write and tell how the deed had been found—write, as it were, the order for eviction for Macdonald of Westray ; pull the

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

old house down, quench its light, leave it to the "mist and mirk."

She rose hastily, seeking distraction, and, passing by the window, parted the curtains to look out for a moment. It was dark and cold, but not stormy—at least, not for Westray. With that keen cold wind the coming day should be fine. And the light showed clear on the darkness of sea and sky. But there would be no light visible on the eastern side of the point to-night, since the nursery was deserted. If she had thought of that before, she would have put a lamp there, for people had become used to trusting the nursery window as a guide—not that anyone would dream of crossing the strand on such a dark night.

She went softly about the various little offices of a sick-room, but the thought of that lightless window remained curiously persistent, driving her at last—with a smile at her own foolishness, since it must be close on dawn—into passing to the nursery and lighting the lamp. As she set it in the window, the words of the song recurred to her, "*Empty o' a' but pain.*" Their insistency made her frown, though they fitted facts well. Her life was, indeed, empty of all but pain—emptier by far than the heroine's of the song had

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

been. Her sacrifice had done some good. There were eyes to see her light ; there were none here.

So she thought ; but she was wrong. Someone in the worst part of the strand saw it—saw it, and paused in the song he was singing defiantly, as he tried to keep out the deadly chill of a north wind blowing through wet clothes by walking up and down the few yards of firm ground he dare not leave till the dawn came, unless the tide came first, and then he must try and swim for it. So the song ended in a queer sort of laugh, as Magnus O'Neil pulled himself together from the endurance which had become barely conscious.

“The light o' love !” he muttered. “I shall do it yet, ankle and all—at least, I can try—for if that light keeps steady, it must come from Westray.”

It did keep steady, so, after a minute or two, he went stumbling and limping to the left, for that slip in getting out of the boat had wrenched the old injury to the ankle a bit. His lameness, indeed, had been one reason for sticking to the shortest route, despite the lack of a guiding light in the little laird's window—a lack which had filled him with apprehension, and made him set his teeth over the possibility of Margaret being



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

disturbed in the first hours of an overwhelming grief; then a reckless pleasure in the idea of doing a dangerous thing for the sake of saving one who refused to credit him with the least care for her welfare from a trivial insult, had had its influence also. She would never hear of what he had done—at least, he hoped not—but the memory of it would be a satisfaction to himself. So he had struggled on even when the foolhardiness of his attempt showed itself clearly; for by that time another factor had entered into this question of crossing the strand—his own life. He had lost his bearings utterly, and with no landmark save the sand beginning to shiver under his feet, he might be either on the brink of the Atlantic or of the quicksands.

But now, with that light as a pole-star, he knew where the sea lay, and struck out for it boldly, since in it lay his best chance. The water would at least give him more support than the shifting, sucking sand; but it would be cold—icy cold! Even in the immediate peril to life he shrank from this trivial discomfort, and his mind turned regretfully to the blue skies and sunny air with which he had so often tried to tempt Margaret.

*“ Kennst du das land ? ”*

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

Half dazed by the intense chill of his wet clothes, he sang the song of the South as he stumbled on—sang as men so often do when they know it is a question of their warmth, their vitality, against a death from sheer cold.

Ah! that was water beneath his feet—water growing deeper and deeper! He stooped down and began to unlace his boots, for he might have to swim for the star, though he hoped to be able to wade most of the way. So, with a shiver, stripped save for his shirt and trousers, he made for waist-deep water, where the bottom would be firm, then steered for the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was just dawn, and Tiny had relieved her mistress nearly an hour before; but that letter, which would leave her life empty indeed, had been no easy one for Margaret to write, and even now, when it was written, she paused with it in her hand, looking out from the window at the familiar landscape just beginning to gain colour from the first rays of the sun. It seemed incredible that she should be giving it up—for nothing. As she stood, trying to realize the fact, her attention was diverted by the sight of a man's figure crouching in a sheltered corner of the garden wall. It was Angus Mohr, surely, judging

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

by the length of limbs, the set of the slouched shoulders? What was he doing there? No good, certainly. She laid down the letter sharply, and passed out of the hall-door to confront him. Yes, it was Angus Mohr, apparently asleep. She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in Gaelic.

He roused himself confusedly, then, with a half-shamefaced excuse, prepared to move off; but she stopped him.

"What is it? What do you want? What have you been doing?"

"It is doing nothing," he said sullenly, as he shook himself free. "And I may want things long enough before Mistress Macdonald will be giving me them."

Margaret stood looking after him, half surprised, half angry for a minute, and then, as the bright, if chill, beauty of the morning attracted her, paused idly. A brisk walk among the sands, she thought, would refresh her more after her night's vigil than any attempt at rest. She took her plaid from the hall, then passed through to the kitchen, to assure herself of Marion's presence there in case anything was wanted, and so, by the back-way, went down to the strand, giving

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

a glance at the bay ere she dipped to the shore. The *St. Kilda* was gone ; over the point there was no sign of the yacht's trim spars. The island was empty indeed ; yet not without signs of life unusual at that early hour ; for on the rough road leading Clachan-wards Angus Mohr's slouching figure showed near, and in the distance another figure was coming to meet it. And there, comparatively close, was Kate-gorach at her old tricks, crouching by a patch of seaweed, chuckling, no doubt, over something she had found. What ?

Margaret wrapped the plaid tighter, and walked on to see.

It was something almost hidden by the seaweed which appeared to have been piled up, and Kate sate curiously still, as if she were holding something close to her. She was curiously ill-clad, too, for, on chilly days, as a rule, she put on one ragged garment over another ; but to-day her skinny arms showed bare. Yet there were clothes there among the seaweed. What was it she had found ? Margaret's step quickened.

Heaven save us ! Surely a man—a drowned man, doubtless—happed about with all the poor fool's clothes, covered with seaweed, clasped close to the poor fool's heart for warmth and shelter.

“Dead men's feet,” chuckled Kate softly.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

“Coming, coming, come ! Coming, coming, come !”

But Margaret was on her knees beside her now, and her cry rang sharp over the sand :

“Give him to me, Kate—give him to me !”

But Kate had found what she had sought so long—had found the dead drowned lover, and held him fast, his face hidden in her breast. Yet Margaret knew, for she had seen a figure like that before, with the still, delicate, nervous hands. She had one of them in hers now, and its touch thrilled her.

“Let me see his face, anyhow, Kate,” pled Margaret, though she knew quite well whose the face was. It did not need Angus Mohr’s exclamation of “The Man from the Sea !” as, arrested by Margaret’s first cry, the big man came running up to see what was amiss, to tell her that.

“Angus ! make her give him up,” she cried. “He may not be dead yet, and she will not loose her hands.”

But the old vague terror kept Angus aloof with that old terror-stricken whisper, “The Man from the Sea—he has come back !”

“What is it, Mrs. Macdonald ?” came another voice from afar, and Margaret gave a sob of relief.

## A FOOL'S WISDOM

Here was someone who would help. A minute after, Hugh Macleod had unloosed Kate's clutching fingers, and Margaret had Magnus O'Neil in her arms.

"He is not dead, I think," she almost whispered—"I think he is not dead."

"Here, Angus," said Hugh Macleod peremptorily, "keep Kate from bothering. Dead? No. I think she has kept life in him—I do, indeed. Don't move, Mrs. Macdonald. Heap those clothes over him again, and hold him close. I've some whisky here. Angus, drop that fool, and run like the devil to the house—blankets, hot water, fire—everything. It is safer than carrying him through the cold as he is, for it's the chill has knocked him over, not the water—his hair isn't wet."

Margaret could feel that by her cheek, and she could feel that his body was not so chill as his hands. He was not dead—he could not, must not, be dead! A vast tenderness surged through her, a great wave of pity, regret, remorse.

So she sate with him, holding him, sheltering him, as Kate had done, while people came running from the house with this and that, and after a time, as in a dream, she heard Hugh Macleod say: "There! he is coming to himself."

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

And there he was for a moment—he himself in her arms.

“ Did they—smash—the windows ?” he said, and then he was off again.

“ I wonder what he meant by that ?” said Margaret, as they were carrying him to the house in a blanket.

Hugh Macleod, lending a hand, gave her a sharp look. “ The Scarva people meant to smash your windows this morning, Mrs. Macdonald, but I shipped the lot off before dawn and sold them that way. He must have heard. Angus told me, and then came up to watch here in case——”

Margaret put out her hand with a sudden gesture of appeal for silence. Her own lack of judgment stunned her.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LIGHT OF LOVE

ONCE again a low room overlooking an unbroken expanse of the wide Atlantic, lit by the last rays of the sun, contained all the elements of this world's tragedy—a man, a woman, and a child. But the look on their faces held that hint of something beyond and above the workaday world which brings a new heaven and a new earth with it.

Magnus—who had taken possession of the empty nursery in the morning—had come over in the afternoon, not much the worse for his adventure, thanks to poor Kate's blind instinct of love, to see Ronald in the sunny western room. And now the boy sat cuddled up in blankets on his favourite's lap, pleading in the pauses of conversation, "Tem'me some more, pleasth, Misther Magnuth;" while Margaret, standing at the window, looked at them with content in her eyes.

"Be quiet a bit, Ron, and I'll tell you a fine



## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

tale by-and-by," came the musical voice. "You see, Margaret, we really could manage—that is to say, if you haven't repented already of—of this morning. It was hardly fair, perhaps, when you didn't know but what you were going to get rid of the Man from the Sea altogether." His eyes were upon her, half in jest, half in earnest, then turned to the boy again. "But if you haven't, I don't see why we should leave Westray. I have enough money to keep you and the boy down South, and if I were to stop here and manage the estate for you—why, in these solitudes I might, idler as I am, write a masterpiece and make our fortunes. Think of it, Margaret! The sun rises at ten, doesn't it? and sets at two. There you are! Four hours for exercise and recreation, and keeping the crofters content; the rest for sleep and dreams—dreams of you and the sun—dreams of a new heaven, a new earth—people like to read about that sort of thing in their leisure. Why! what is it, dear?"

She had crossed to where he sat, and laid her hand on his arm appealingly.

"Don't talk of it, please. It might have been, I dare say, if—if we hadn't both made mistakes. But it can't be now. I have meant to tell you all day, but I couldn't make up my mind. I—

## THE LIGHT OF LOVE

I've found the deed of sale, Magnus. Kate must have hidden it somewhere, for I found her with it after the eviction. I meant to burn it, as I said I would, and then—then Tiny came to tell me Ronald was so ill. So I didn't ; and when the doctors said he could not live here, where was the use ?" She paused, and he laid one hand on hers consolingly.

"And so——"

"I had just written to Evan enclosing the deed, when I went out and found you"—she paused, then continued with a tremble in her voice—"found you covered up in one of my husband's old coats which I had given Kate. Wasn't it strange ? So I never sent the letter."

Magnus gave a quick exclamation.

"Then where is it ?"

"Downstairs. I'll show it to you by-and-by, if you like. But that, you see, ends it."

"Why ? You can burn it still. You always said you would." His hand on hers held it closer.

She shook her head.

"I couldn't, somehow. I don't feel sure enough of myself. I've made too many mistakes already—about so many things—Angus—and—and you ?"

He gave a little satisfied laugh.

"Not human enough for the crime, or too

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

human—which is it, dear ? Well, I never thought you would, when it came to the point.”

“Didn’t you ?” she said, drawing her hand away suddenly. “I think I should.”

He looked at her frown and flush coolly.

“That can stand over as a point of difference. Meanwhile, I should like to see the deed. Could you bring it me now ?”

When she returned with it Ronald was in full blast of hoarse whispered questionings.

“Then she never ’tuck no more pins into her bleegin’ heart, Misther Magnuth ?” he asked regretfully.

“Never no more. It ceased to bleege from that day forth, and they lived happy ever after. Now be quiet, and let me read.”

There was no sound at all in the room. Margaret, standing by the window, her hands tightly clasped, was still as a statue.

“Margaret !” came Magnus’s voice at last. “I suppose you will be angry with me for not having told you or hinted at this before, though, of course, everything was uncertain. But I wanted you to give up Westray, and the thought of *this*—though you wouldn’t confess it—always shook your purpose. That was why you were so angry about it, really. Well, very possibly—

## THE LIGHT OF LOVE

most likely, indeed—it isn't worth the paper it is written on."

Margaret turned quickly.

"Why ? It is signed and witnessed."

"Yes, signed and sealed, but not delivered. There is no evidence whatever to show that your husband would have sent this. I am a lawyer, as you know, or a bit of one, and a case very similar to this once interested me—would do for a novel, I thought. The envelope is addressed, of course, and may or may not have been closed ; but it never left your husband's charge. He might have intended to burn it. If he had even given it to a servant, or put it in the recognized place for posting letters, or if——"

"If what ?" Margaret asked slowly.

"If, for instance, there had been a letter saying definitely that the deed was enclosed for safe custody—a specific letter of delivery. But there is none—nothing but the deed itself, of which your husband might have repented. So three cheers for Macdonald of Westray and the master-piece ! Eh, you white-faced little laird ?"

Ronald, comprehending nothing but the smile, smiled in reply ; but Margaret at the window made no sign, and Magnus looked towards her, surprised at her silence.

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Suddenly she turned and faced him. She was very pale ; her lips quivered slightly, but her bright eyes, despite their look of anxiety, met his boldly.

“ There *was* a letter,” she said slowly—“ a letter to his lawyer. I found it that day when Evan first told me, and I began to look. I found it in his dressing-room—in the little box where we used to put letters for my husband to post when he went to the Clachan. I found it, but I can’t tell you what was in it, for I only read a little bit, and then——”

“ Yes ?” said Magnus quietly.

“ I burnt it. I said always I would do it,” she went on swiftly. “ I never pretended. It is not my fault if——”

“ If what ?”

She turned away proudly, despite the sudden crimson on her cheeks.

“ If—if you would not believe—if you thought me better than I am—if—if you are disappointed. That is all.”

Magnus put the child down gently, and limped over to her, his eyes shining.

“ So, after all, you were human enough both to commit a crime and fall in love. Oh, Margaret ! my dear, my dear ! If you only knew

## THE LIGHT OF LOVE

how great a consolation that knowledge is to me, who have done both more than once!" He stood silent, his hand in hers, more like a friend than a lover, for a minute or two, as if lost in the past; then, with an effort, he pulled himself together. "But it makes a difference, of course. We can't fight, can we? It's a pity, in a way. You will feel as if you were turned out of Paradise—turned out into the cold——"

"Misther Magnuth, Misther Magnuth," came Ronald's feeble croak, "look at a twinkle 'tar—a twinkle 'tar just 'agun."

It had. Far on the unseen horizon of sea and sky, as if pointing the way over the edge of the world, the beacon shone bright.

Magnus O'Neil looked at it for a moment, then turned to Margaret, the concern, the gravity, gone from his face.

"An' the Gift o' God went flamin'  
Far through the mirk at sea;  
For the licht o' love——"

The quotation, which had merged in an unmistakable, if inarticulate, sound, was broken in on by a cough. It came from Tiny, who had entered with the lamp, and who now, after setting it on the table, put it out deliberately.

"There were but three lights in the Laird o'

## THE GIFT OF THE GODS

Grant's house," she said briefly, "an' ane's eneuch the noo, I'm thinking, in Westray." She turned to go discreetly, but at the door she paused, to give another delighted look at the pair by the window. "An' to think," she murmured to herself, "that I soud hae tellt her frae the first moment that he was God's gift frae the sea to some puir wearyin' woman. I'll jest haud yon ower Gilchrist, gin he doots the word o' sic a minor-prophet-o'-a-wife as he's gettin'—an' sair he needs ane, puir lammie !"

THE END









